valued voices

A REPORT ON WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EQUALITY

IF WE DON'T GET VALUE FOR THE WORK WE DO, THIS IS A SOCIAL ISSUE WE STILL HAVE TO EXIST, HOLD OUR HEAD UP WITH PRIDE I'M GETTING TIRED OF BEING A PIONEER GET THE SELF-ESTEEM TO SAY I CAN AND I WILL...AND OTHER WOMEN WILL FOLLOW THERE HAS TO BE SOMETHING IN PLACE FOR BOTH THOSE WHO WANT TO WORK OUTSIDE THE HOME AND THOSE WHO WANT TO WORK INSIDE THE HOME...DIGNITY AND RESPECT EITHER WAY BACK TO THE CHILD CARE ISSUE...I'VE HEARD THAT IT CAN BE USED TO BREAK THE CYCLE THERE'S A BACKLASH ABOUT SOCIAL HOUSING EVERY MAN WHO HAS A WOMAN IN THE HOME DOING UNPAID WORK HAS A HUGE ADVANTAGE IN THE WORKFORCE WE NEED TO WORK WITH THE MINISTRY OF EDUCATION IN HIGH SCHOOLS TO INFORM YOUNG WOMEN OF OUR HISTORY...OF HOW POWERFUL WE'VE BEEN I SEE A REAL PROBLEM IN THE SCHOOLS WITH YOUNG GIRLS GETTING PREGNANT I'D LIKE TO SEE THE RECOGNITION OF ABORIGINAL PROGRAMMING WE'LL HAVE MORE SUCCESSES IF WE HAVE WOMEN MENTORS IN RURAL AND URBAN AREAS WE'VE HAD OCCASIONS WHERE WOMEN WHO CAME FROM ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIPS WERE DOUBLY DISADVANTAGED UNEMPLOYED WOMEN ON SOCIAL ASSISTANCE AND LOW-INCOME WOMEN'S VOICES NEED TO BE HEARD MINORITY WOMEN ARE STILL DEALING WITH BARRIERS TO INCLUSIVITY WOMEN ARE UNDER-REPRESENTED IN APPRENTICESHIPS — WE NEED TO PROVIDE TRAINING/EDUCATION FOR THE BIG-DOLLAR VOCATIONS HARDLY ANYTHING ELSE MATTERS UNTIL WE ADDRESS THE ISSUE OF VIOLENCE WOMEN ARE IN PART-TIME WORK AND HAVE NO BENEFITS — THEY ARE THE WORKING POOR AND ARE TRAPPED EQUAL PAY FOR WOMEN FOR WORK OF EQUAL VALUE — AS A STAY-AT-HOME MOM, I GET NO MONEY NOW AND NO PENSION OR SUPPORT WHEN I AM OLDER WOMEN ARE MAKING MORE LIKE TWENTY-FIVE CENTS ON THE DOLLAR, COMPARED TO MEN IN RESOURCE COMMUNITIES WOMEN AREN'T VALUED FOR THEIR CAREGIVING ROLES MY DOCTOR SAYS THAT OVER 30 PER CENT OF HIS PATIENTS ARE WOMEN OF WHOM THE WORLD EXPECTS TOO MUCH I HAVE SEEN THE PAY EQUITY GAP — A MALE EQUIVALENT GOT $15,000 MORE ONCE WE HAVE EQUAL STANDING IN THE COMMUNITY, WE CAN CONTRIBUTE EQUALLY TO THE ECONOMIC WELL-BEING OF OUR FAMILIES AND OUR COMMUNITIES THE PERCEPTION IS THAT, AS WOMEN AGE, THEY ARE LESS ABLE TO DO A JOB WOMEN WORK FOR FREE IN THE HOME LOOKING AFTER CHILDREN AND ARE FOREVER PENALIZED FOR DOING THAT UNPAID WORK WOMEN OF COLOUR FEEL ABANDONED BY THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT AND WANT FULL EQUALITY WE NEED MORE WOMEN CONSIDERING NON-TRADITIONAL CAREERS TO BE A WOMAN IN A NON-TRADITIONAL AREA AND IN COMMUNITIES WHERE THERE ISN'T ADVOCACY PUTS A WOMAN AT RISK ECONOMIC EQUALITY IS MORE THAN JUST MAKING MONEY IF YOU GO OUT TO WORK IF WE VALUE CHILDREN, WE WILL VALUE CAREGIVERS WHO STAY AT HOME

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The Ministry of Women's Equality was established in 1991 with a mandate to work in partnership with all government ministries, Crown corporations and agencies, community groups and the private sector, to build a society where women experience equality in all aspects of their lives.

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This report is dedicated to the hundreds of women across B.C. who shared their stories, their struggles, their insights and their ideas during the consultations. Your input will help to direct the change. Your courage will inspire the actions that will move us closer to the vision of true economic and social equality. By continuing our work together, we're confident we will reach our shared vision.

We've Come a Long Way. We Have a Way to Go — *Together*.

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Introduction

The Ministry of Women's Equality has an ongoing commitment to the women of the province. We have a vision of a society where women's contributions are fully recognized and valued, where women have equal choice and opportunity and where women are free from the fear of violence, abuse and discrimination.

Since its creation ten years ago, the ministry has worked to ensure that the perspectives and realities of women's lives are adequately reflected in the decisions and policies of government. Much of the ministry's focus has centred on ending violence against women in B.C., and on issues of health and reproductive choice. For fear and abuse, poor health and the lack of choice are at the root of women's inequality — they are among the key factors that thwart women's ability to access opportunity and advancement and attain economic security.

Throughout our ongoing work with the women of B.C., women identified economic security as a major concern. As a result, starting in June 2000, the ministry embarked on an extensive, ten-month public consultation process to record women's views and recommendations on the issue.

The consultation process involved feedback on the widely circulated discussion paper, *Women's Economic Security and Pay Equity*, eight regional forums, five specialized equity forums, and B.C.'s first women's economic equality conference.

We heard from more than 1200 people — individuals, representatives of women-serving organizations, unions, the business and educational communities, and local governments. The issues identified were diverse: at times, the dialogue was intense. Yet the collaborative spirit was evident throughout, as participants focused on identifying solutions to advance the equality agenda.

We heard many voices and a variety of views. However, a common message emerged. Women want to be valued for who they are and for their contributions to society.

Women experience many challenges to economic well-being: poverty; unemployment; disability; ill-health; the inexperience of youth; the limitations of old age and sadly, discriminatory attitudes based on their race, ethnicity, colour, age or sexual orientation.

Women also share the unique privilege — and consequences — of child bearing. This reality has fundamental repercussions on women's choices, opportunities, advancement, promotions, earnings, and future retirement incomes, in a day and age when most people need paid work to meet their immediate and future financial obligations.

In addition, women carry a disproportionate responsibility for caregiving and family responsibilities. More than 72 per cent of informal caregivers are women, and single parents, most of whom are women, carry that responsibility alone.

It is these realities, coupled with ongoing discrepancies in women's and men's wages that prompted the government to confront the issues, consult with women, and press on for change.

By continuing our work together, we are confident we will reach our shared vision.

We've Come a Long Way. We Have a Way to Go — *Together*.

In 1999, British Columbia women and girls represented 50.3 per cent of the provincial population. As workers, caregivers, mothers, daughters, professionals and community leaders, our efforts on all fronts have had a profound impact on the quality of the social and economic health in the province.

It has not been easy. Not long ago, women's social, political and economic contributions were virtually unrecognized and undervalued. Our joint efforts to navigate change and make equality a reality were challenged.

The women of B.C. however, have overcome formidable barriers and today, our contributions and achievements are greater than ever.

> Women are a key part of our labour force. Eighty per cent of women aged 25 to 44 are in the workforce. By 2007, as many women as men will be working in paid jobs.
> Women are among our best-educated citizens. In 1996, women received 58 per cent of BAs granted, 54 per cent of MAs and 31 per cent of PhDs.
> Women's influence is growing. The proportion of women in the executive ranks of B.C.'s public sector rose to 32.2 per cent as of January 2000. Financial, media and academic sectors all feature women at the highest levels.
> B.C. women are marching into non-traditional roles. In 1999, the number of women enrolled in industrial training apprenticeship programs increased by 20 per cent. Women now account for 24 per cent of all new apprentices in the trades.

Yet despite these gains, there is much left to do. In many respects, women's contributions are still undervalued. The facts are our markers — our motivators for change.

An Issue of Balance – The Facts

> While women are increasing their participation in the paid labour force to support themselves and their families, they remain the primary caregivers in British Columbia. More than 72 per cent of informal caregivers are women and many single parents, most of whom are women, carry that responsibility alone.
> As our population ages, more women are taking on the added responsibility of elder care.

The Issue of Equity – The Facts

> Women doing paid work are still on an unequal footing with men. Women earn 73 cents for every dollar a man earns. Low wage redress measures and public sector pay equity policies have narrowed the wage gap in the public sector. Regular, full-time, full-year female public servants now earn 88 cents for every dollar their male counterparts earn.
> Women remain under-represented in many occupations, and glass ceilings remain intact for many women in senior management positions.

A Framework for Dialogue

The Issue of Poverty – The Facts

> Women's poverty continues to undermine their ability to advance. Aboriginal and visible minority women have a 33 per cent chance of being poor. Fifty-two per cent of single mothers live in poverty, and half of B.C.'s senior women suffer the loneliness and isolation of an impoverished existence.

> Seventy-four per cent of minimum wage earners age 25 and over are women.

The Issue of Systemic Barriers – The Facts

> Other obstacles to equality have yet to be overcome — discrimination and intolerance, limited access, violence, workplace segregation and harassment. All of these are directly related to a woman's ability to seek opportunities and attain economic security — and equality.

The discussion paper *Women's Economic Security and Pay Equity*, released in June, 2000, examined women's changing role in the labour market. The paper addresses the challenge of balancing work and family responsibilities, as well as the many other factors that put women at an economic disadvantage. It focuses on issues of poverty, economic security, and justice and fairness in the wage system, and proposes numerous options to address these issues.

The paper was intended to stimulate discussion about a variety of options summarized under four themes.

> *Closing the Wage Gap*
> *Closing the Poverty Gap*
> *Supporting Women, Children and Families*
> *Increasing Women's Representation in Positions of Influence*

Public Consultation Process — *Valued Voices*

Discussion Paper

The consultation process began with the release of the discussion paper and an open invitation to individual women and representatives of all sectors to consider questions related to each of the four themes. Written submissions were encouraged.

Regional Forums

The four discussion paper themes also provided the framework for dialogue at closed and public meetings held in eight regions. These forums were held in Kamloops, Kelowna, Prince George, Victoria, Nanaimo, Terrace, Cranbrook and Surrey South Fraser.

The regional forums consisted of:

> A small informal closed discussion with a random selection of 12–18 women from the community. These sessions were designed to hear from individual women who are generally not inclined to speak freely in larger public forums.

> An open session to which identified groups and the public were invited.

Women's Economic Equality Conference

Following the regional forums, the ministry hosted: *Beyond the Gap*, **Women's Economic Equality Conference**, October 12–14, 2000. The conference was another opportunity for women to discuss strategies to bridge inequities. It was also a venue to encourage networking and partnership building to support women's economic equality.

Equity Forums

As a result of feedback received at the forums and the conference, the ministry held five more forums for women who face additional barriers — urban Aboriginal and Métis women, rural Aboriginal and Métis women, lesbians, women with disabilities and women of colour. The ministry involved representatives of each of these communities in the development and facilitation of the forums.

Methodology

The public consultation was an opportunity to listen to women and to hear first hand about the issues that were important to them. While the four themes of the discussion paper provided a valuable framework for the consultations, women were encouraged to speak to any issues or perspectives that reflected their personal experiences. No attempt was made to quantify the issues that were brought forward. Nor was there any attempt to gain unanimity or consensus, though at times, this emerged in some sessions.

Rather, the intent of the consultation was to provide a forum for the free exchange of information and ideas and to seek greater insight and understanding of the wide range of issues affecting B.C. women from diverse backgrounds and circumstances.

This report is structured to reflect the many issues and suggestions that emerged and to illustrate the depth and substance of the discussions that took place. No part of this report is a verbatim transcript of the proceedings that were not taped. All material is drawn from flip chart notes of the facilitators as well as ministry staff notes and observations. No priority ranking is accorded to any of the issues that were discussed.

Sharing a Vision, Shaping the Future

"If we can't deal with all the issues that affect women, the advancement of economic equality can't happen. We have to deal with the exclusion of women in all the ways they are excluded."

Throughout the consultations there were many voices and many views. However, there was a common voice. No matter where they came from, no matter what their race, religion, age, identity or economic status, women shared their experiences, and their hope for a society where women are equal in every aspect of their lives. They shared a common vision — a vision of a society where women are free from fear and discrimination and able to exercise choices and where women's diverse experiences and backgrounds, skills, and contributions are acknowledged and valued.

The Path to True Equality

Women believe persistent stereotypes and attitudes are at the core of women's inequality. Repeatedly, participants suggested that a fundamental change in the way society views women and their contributions is needed before the shared vision can be realized.

In a very real sense, women want to be accepted for who they are in all their diversity and to have their contributions in the home, the community and in the workplace recognized and valued equally with men's contributions.

Participants stressed that actions on a number of fronts will signal integral recognition and understanding of this belief. While there were peripheral thoughts and issues, women went beyond the simple airing of views to make concrete proposals for change. Discussions crystallized around the key issues and actions needed. These are grouped under the four themes addressed in the discussion paper.

Closing the Wage Gap

Pay Equity

Women who voiced an opinion on this subject generally agreed that women's work is undervalued compared to men's work and that more effort has to be made to provide equal pay for work of equal value.

Women generally supported some form of legislated pay equity, expressing concern that employers and male-dominated organizations have not responded to a voluntary approach. Those who did prefer a voluntary approach expressed concerns about additional red tape for business and cost to small business and non-profit social service agencies. Some suggested government funding for non-government organizations (NGOs); others called for tax incentives to ease the transition for business.

Most women who favoured legislation did not specify what form such legislation should take. Of those who did, many represented organized labour. The preferred model was for pro-active legislation to ensure compliance, monitoring and enforcement. The general concern was that a complaint-based system tended to put the onus on the more vulnerable, dependent party who is at a disadvantage.

Whatever the form of legislation, women indicated that employers should be consulted, as the impact on their businesses could be varied.

Whether or not pay equity was legislated, women generally expressed support for the need to educate employers and to provide them with practical assistance to understand pay equity and to help them implement gender-neutral job evaluation plans.

Women who were living in poverty expressed the view that pay equity was not a meaningful concept to those who were denied employment opportunities for lack of training or education or because of discrimination or because they were experiencing violence and abuse.

Discrimination and Workplace Harassment

Women who expressed a view on this issue suggested unfriendly workplace environments and resistance to women's participation in male-dominated sectors restrict opportunities and advancement for women. They noted that this has a significant impact on women's incomes and emotional well-being.

A number of participants pointed to the multiple burdens that some women from equity groups face. Many of these women contend with additional discrimination because of their race, disability, sexual orientation or age. This was a recurring theme with women of colour, lesbians, Aboriginal women, and women with disabilities, who cited discrimination and harassment as major obstacles to their economic security.

Women underlined the need for government training assistance to help employers and employees understand sexual and workplace harassment issues.

On a number of occasions, participants noted that female farm workers, textile workers and domestic employees are vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. Many are immigrant women not fluent in English. Others work in isolated communities.

Women also reported ongoing violations to the *Employment Standards Act*, particularly in areas related to wages, hours of work and access to leave.

There were several recommendations to increase women's access to union membership to provide support and protection to marginalized workers and the large number of women in part-time jobs.

Employment Equity

Numerous women noted that systemic discrimination — based on a woman's colour, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age or geographical location — continues to be a barrier to employment, workplace advancement and wage equity. Many who spoke to the issue called for more effective and enforced employment equity measures across all sectors of the labour market. Some suggested that the government set an example by being more rigorous in applying and enforcing its own employment equity measures. Others called for contract compliance measures to ensure that the awarding of government contracts is contingent on diversity training and equity hiring.

Women from equity groups said they routinely face a lack of respect for their cultural needs as well as discrimination and harassment in the workplace. They said systemic barriers block both their career and economic advancement — and contribute to their economic insecurity.

A number spoke of the distressing impact this has on their lives. Lesbian women spoke of the pressures to remain "invisible" or face hostile consequences. Women with disabilities talked about ever-persistent, negative attitudes towards disabled people. Women of colour spoke of the lack of cultural sensitivity and ongoing discrimination. And, Aboriginal women referenced the historic and continuing systemic oppression they face.

These women, and many others, called for a comprehensive employment equity strategy to cover all sectors of the labour force.

Foreign Credentials

Many women of colour expressed frustration that the education and skills they had gained in other countries were not recognized in Canada. In spite of their education, they are often forced to take low-paying entry-level jobs. The lack of recognition was viewed as a major barrier to opportunities and economic security. Some women suggested that race often played a part in the failure to recognize foreign credentials. A number of women called on the government to review the assessment and accreditation of foreign-trained professionals.

Others recommended the government create more opportunities for women in areas such as Licensed Practical Nursing, to allow women to upgrade their skills to the level of Registered Nurse. Still others were critical of the federal government's Live-in Caregivers Program suggesting it restricted opportunities for educated immigrant women to access education and better paying jobs.

Small Business and Self-employment

Women viewed self-employment, co-operatives and starting small businesses as a promising alternative to low-paying or part-time employment, especially in communities where employment opportunities are limited. These options were also cited as an attractive option for many women who want to combine childcare with work. This was particularly pronounced in more remote, rural areas, and among Aboriginal women and women of colour who spoke of the importance of recognizing and promoting forms of economic development that are a "cultural match."

Numerous women spoke of the need for lending programs that address the specific needs of women. Others recommended increased entrepreneurial training and information, as well as income supports and benefits for women entrepreneurs. Many also called on the government to extend the time limit for earnings exemptions for income assistance recipients who are starting self-employed or co-operative businesses. This would give them sufficient time to make the businesses viable.

Women in Non-traditional Occupations

Most women continue to work in a narrow range of occupations and many are employed in part-time jobs. Participants spoke of the significant impact this has on their earnings and future retirement incomes and stressed the need to encourage women to move into non-traditional occupations.

Some noted that women continue to be under-represented in science, math, information technology and the trades that offer higher-paying career opportunities.

Others pointed out that discrimination and harassment continue to be major barriers for women entering these fields. Sometimes, they said, gender-biased hiring practices such as using eligibility requirements governing physical and height or weight standards discriminate against women. Other times, open on-the-job harassment deters women from entering or advancing in these career paths.

Women called on the education system, trades and professional organizations, employers, unions and government to work collaboratively to educate employers and employees about discrimination and harassment and to encourage more young women to consider non-traditional careers.

Some suggested incentives from government and employers, like bursaries and awards, to support women entering into apprenticeships and non-traditional fields. Others stressed the importance of mentoring and similar supports for women.

Closing the Poverty Gap

Social Assistance and Income Support

In many regions, the plight of the working poor and social assistance recipients was raised. Apart from the need to change prevailing negative attitudes towards the poor, women suggested improvements to current social assistance programs are also required.

Women generally identified the current income assistance rates as being too low to meet basic needs. Many women who lived on income assistance described the damage that living in poverty did to their dignity and self-esteem.

Many were also critical of current rules for earnings exemptions. They suggested the rules fail to recognize the reality that many women are employed in part-time and casual employment with little oppc tunity to find permanent full-time employment with sufficient income, especially if they are single parents.

Many women identified a need to extend the time limit for earning exemptions under the BC Benefits program. These changes would enable women to work part-time to supplement their benefits, and at the same time, gain valuable work experience, without financial penalty. There were also requests for a re-evaluation of the eligibility criteria of the program. Some women perceived current income and asset testing to be too stringent.

Women with disabilities called for a restructuring of disability benefits to provide a more adequate income. They suggested economic security is about having a choice. An enhanced benefit system would allow women the option to further their education or to work, without losing financial or other benefits. Women of colour reinforced the need for enhanced benefits for refugee women.

There were also concerns raised about the Family Maintenance Program. Specifically, many women expressed the view that the program penalizes women whose spouses or ex-spouses fail to pay their maintenance regularly. Women in receipt of income assistance are eligible for a monthly $100 maintenance exemption. However, the exemption does not apply retroactively, when payments are made on arrears.

While there was strong support for existing Bridging programs that help women leaving abusive relationships to re-enter the workforce, there was a call for greater access to training programs generally. Women reported long waiting lists for training, and suggested that in many cases, women are unable to access appropriate training programs when they need to. Aboriginal women urged the government to award training contracts to Aboriginal contractors in areas where Aboriginal people constitute a significant portion of the caseload.

The need for more coordinated and integrated services was highlighted frequently. Aboriginal women cited the need for a federal/provincial review of on- and off-reserve subsidies to eliminate disparities and women generally called for better co-ordinated and integrated services between federal and provincial income support programs.

There were numerous requests for better and more accessible information about the range of government support services available to women requiring social assistance. Suggestions included increasing the use of the ministry Web site, implementing a toll-free line for information and referral services, and establishing women's offices in each community.

Some participants noted that women living on social assistance often face disrespectful attitudes from front-line government employees. They recommended greater sensitivity training to increase employees' understanding of the plight of disadvantaged people and more effort to hire women from equity target groups.

Minimum Wage

A number of women strongly supported increases to the minimum wage, suggesting increases have a significant and positive impact for many part-time workers, single women, and domestic and agricultural workers.

Others expressed concerns that although minimum wage increases are desirable, they are not sufficient by themselves for closing the poverty gap. They suggested that if the only job a woman can get is a minimum wage job, she is sometimes better off on welfare, especially if she is a single parent. This is because women who leave income assistance programs lose the health and other benefits of these programs yet they often do not receive benefits from their new employers.

Some women recommended that transition to work benefits could be improved and extended to allow women in minimum wage jobs some time to get settled before they have to assume the costs of benefits that they lose by going off assistance.

Part-time Benefits

Women spoke about the prevalence of low-paying part-time jobs in resource-based and tourism-based communities, and throughout the economy generally. This reality has a significant impact on women's income, job security, and economic security. Most of these jobs offer few, if any benefits or pensions, and leave women in precarious financial situations in their senior years.

Some women called for legislation to provide benefits for part-time workers, and for pension reforms to address the inadequacies inherent in part-time work. Others suggested increased access to union membership for women in part-time jobs would offer added economic security.

Safe, Affordable Housing

Women viewed the lack of affordable housing as a major contributor to women's and children's poverty. They underlined the plight of many single-parent families who spend a disproportionately large part of their income on housing. They recommended a greater investment in affordable housing to alleviate the financial pressures on single-parent families, low-income workers, women on social assistance and disability benefits and homeless women.

There was also considerable discussion of the need for more housing and services for senior women, many of whom receive fixed and limited incomes. Aboriginal women and women of colour raised the importance of having culturally sensitive seniors' housing and services available in their communities, noting how difficult it is for seniors who are isolated from their culture and their community. Lesbian women expressed similar views and recommended the creation of seniors' housing and "gay-friendly" services for lesbians.

Education and Training

There was a strong belief that education and training are the keys to breaking the cycle of poverty. Many women said they felt trapped in low-paying jobs or they were unemployed because of their lack of education and training. They indicated a greater access to more responsive job-readiness programs was needed to assist women to gain financial independence and economic security.

Women suggested that current programs do not adequately address the needs of women who face additional barriers — those who have left abusive relationships, women who have experienced sexual harassment and discrimination, older women or those who require greater English language proficiency.

Some called for more advanced ESL training. Many felt that the Bridges Program was a good model for training women with special needs and that it should be expanded. Others believed that more on-the-job training and re-entry programs were needed, especially for immigrant and older women.

Some suggested tax incentives for businesses to provide training.

Women in more remote and rural communities said related travel and child care costs seriously limit their access.

Throughout the consultations, women reiterated the request for increased capacity in existing programs, and training subsidies to improve access.

Student Loans, Bursaries, and Income Support for Education and Training

Repeatedly, women stressed the need for forgivable student loans. They felt the debt load is often crippling, and prohibits many women from pursuing further education. A number of participants called for more flexible loan repayment plans and forgivable loans for those who use their education to work in isolated communities.

There was strong support for more bursaries and income supports to encourage higher education, particularly in the more remote rural areas where transportation and away-from-home living costs were viewed as a barrier. Participants also recommended financial assistance and cost-sharing arrangements to allow women to enter non-traditional occupations.

Women Leaving Abusive Environments

Violence against women was characterized as a major and growing threat to women's economic security. Women recommended existing programs be maintained and expanded. They also suggested greater access to counselling services to help women make the transition to personal and financial independence.

Participants also recognized the particular vulnerability of sponsored immigrant women who experience abuse by their sponsor. They underlined the need for culturally sensitive services and additional supports for these women.

Transportation Costs for Women in Remote and Rural Communities and for Women with Special Needs

Women with disabilities and those from remote and rural communities said that prohibitive transportation, housing, and child care costs curb their ability to access education, training and employment.

Many communities have no public transit and, if they do, it is often not reliable or accessible. HandyDart was generally viewed by women with disabilities as inadequate for handling the volume of requests and frequently unreliable. Participants identified the need to improve public transportation in remote areas and for women with disabilities. They also suggested transportation and other subsidies to alleviate these obstacles.

Education System

The need for enhanced public school curriculum to address sexism, racism and homophobia and to teach young people about equity values, respect and self-esteem was raised repeatedly.

Many participants pointed out the need to provide young people this type of education in their early years when attitudes are being shaped. Some mentioned the need to educate boys to foster healthier attitudes towards women and to teach them about their responsibilities as parents and as

equal partners in marriage. Others recommended increased and improved instruction on sexuality, life skills, parenting skills and the implications of child-rearing for both girls and boys. Birth control and family planning courses were seen as key to preventing teenage pregnancy — an issue that was described as serious in some rural and remote communities.

Self-esteem of Women

Self-esteem, or the lack of it, was a common and recurring theme in most of the discussions. Some participants suggested that persistent sexist attitudes and a lack of respect for women's contributions breeds low self-esteem. Others noted that the poverty trap and low-end, low-paying jobs contribute to negative attitudes about "self." And, still others stressed the need to help young women develop healthier attitudes about themselves and their capabilities.

In all cases, women believed low self-esteem has a paralyzing impact on a woman's ability to move into or advance within the labour market. It cuts off chances for financial independence and economic security. They recommended education programs and increased counselling assistance to address the issue.

Training programs that develop life skills, self-esteem, decision-making and resourcefulness, were deemed essential to prepare young women for active and fulfilling participation in the labour market.

Special Needs of Women with Additional Barriers to Economic Security

Women of colour spoke of the need to recognize the cultural values they attach to family life and child care. Women with disabilities talked about their requirements for increased technical and human supports in the workplace and the community. Lesbian women stressed their desire to be accepted for who they are, and Aboriginal women explained their traditional holistic approach to family and community health.

These are just some of the examples women pointed to that illustrate the need for more sensitive programs, and for policies that more appropriately address the circumstances of women who face unique barriers. Women suggested the government call upon the day-to-day experiences and expertise of women representatives from those disadvantaged groups, in the formulation of policies and programs affecting them.

Supporting Women, Children and Families

Child Care

While many issues in the discussion paper addressed supports for women such as flexible, women-friendly, family-friendly workplace practices, and job sharing, of all of them, the child care issue sparked the greatest amount of discussion.

Women repeatedly cited accessible child care as one of the key prerequisites to economic security and economic equality. They stressed that the need

to balance work and family responsibilities often determines women's career decisions. Women might decide to delay their entry into the workforce, to work part-time, or to become self-employed. Or they may turn down opportunities for training or promotion, interrupt their careers, or forego paid work experience altogether because women most often shoulder child care responsibilities. These decisions have major repercussions on women's future retirement incomes.

Women who worked part-time, single mothers, shift workers, and women working in isolated, resource-based or agriculture-based communities spoke of the difficulty of finding flexible child care arrangements and urged expanded access.

Women of colour, and Aboriginal and Métis women underlined the need for more culturally sensitive and holistic approaches to child and family care programs and policies.

Other women also called for on-site child care in workplaces, increased salaries for child care workers, and a national child care strategy.

Elder Care Services and Respite Care

In the opinion of many of the participants, elder care is a looming crisis as the population ages. Many women said that the combined stresses of juggling child-care and elder-care responsibilities are affecting their health, their work, and ultimately, their economic circumstances. They suggested that increased funding for elder care and respite care would signal respect and recognition of the value of their caregiving roles.

Women of colour and Aboriginal and Métis women reiterated their desire for family care programs that recognize their unique cultural values while lesbian women suggested the need for "gay-friendly" seniors' care.

Recognition of Unpaid Work

Repeatedly, participants expressed their frustration that women's unpaid work is a crucial societal contribution that is not fully recognized or valued. They noted that women paid the price to stay at home to raise children or care for aging relatives, suggesting that while these contributions relieve pressures on the social support system, they inhibit women's economic security. Because of their unpaid work, many women are financially dependent on husbands and partners or income assistance in their old age.

It was also noted that the majority of volunteer and advocacy work is performed by women and, more often than not, this work provides no pay or pension benefits.

There were a variety of suggestions as to how women could be better recognized for their unpaid work, including a guaranteed minimum wage and pensions and tax benefits for stay-at-home caregivers and volunteers.

Women also recommended increased provincial/federal co-operation in this area, particularly with respect to the provision of benefits for part-time workers and the portability of pensions.

Family-friendly Workplace Practices

Increasingly women are entering the paid labour force to meet the needs of their families. However, women noted that balancing their responsibilities as primary caregivers with their work responsibilities is often difficult. Some women spoke of the physical and emotional toll these dual roles exact. Others suggested that they were discouraged from entering or staying in the paid labour force or from taking on anything more than part-time work because of the pressures of juggling a multitude of responsibilities. Many participants noted these realities impact their sense of economic security.

Women recommended that the government assist employers to develop women-friendly and family-friendly work practices such as job-sharing, flexible hours, on-site child care and telecommuting to help women and employees generally to better balance their work and family responsibilities.

There was general support for initiatives such as the Centre for Workplace Excellence that will offer a range of resources and information to employers to help them implement more welcoming workplace initiatives.

Maternity Leave

A number of participants suggested that mothers are economically penalized when they take time away from the workplace to have children. Careers are interrupted, incomes are reduced and future retirement pensions are affected. Women suggested enhanced maternity benefits would help women balance their work and child-rearing responsibilities, relieve the strain on the child care system, and lessen the immediate and longer-term economic pressures on women and families.

Women's Health

The correlation between women's health and economic security was raised often and a number of specific issues prompted discussion, particularly in more rural and remote regions.

There were numerous references to the critical issue of teenage pregnancy. A number of women spoke of how it limits choices and opportunities for young women and often leads to a never-ending cycle of poverty and dependence. Others referenced the difficulty of accessing contraception or counselling anonymously, if at all, in small communities. And some mentioned that doctors are afraid to offer abortion services in certain communities.

Many participants pointed to the need for increased and improved access to birth control information, contraception and abortion services. Others called for improved instruction on sexuality, birth control, life skills, parenting skills and the implications of child rearing for both boys and girls.

Across the province, home care was also mentioned as a critical issue for older women and women with disabilities. Concerns were also raised about inadequate mental health care and counselling for women with special needs. Some participants called for more counselling services for women leaving abusive relationships and for lesbian women facing the stresses associated with "coming out."

Increasing Women's Representation in Positions of Influence

Mentorship Programs and Community Supports

In virtually every consultation, women viewed mentoring programs and community capacity building as key tools to advance women's economic equality. They highlighted the need for programs that would provide the opportunity for women to share knowledge, develop leadership skills, identify role models, stimulate dialogue and build partnerships — at the community level, across organizations and businesses, and within occupations, education institutions and workplaces.

There was strong support for building the capacity of Aboriginal and Métis women's organizations, and organizations serving women with disabilities, lesbians and women of colour.

Participants recommended that government generally and the Ministry of Women's Equality in particular financially support and facilitate mentorship and leadership programs and supports for women.

Networking Opportunities and Information Exchanges for Women

There was great enthusiasm expressed for further consultations, conferences and other activities to enable women to connect, continue the dialogue, share ideas, and influence policy and program development to advance the agenda.

Women also stressed the importance of creating more opportunities for women leaders — from across all sectors, all income levels, all age groups and all political backgrounds — to meet and better understand each other, and find common ground. Women stressed the importance of forums that are inclusive of women of all backgrounds as well as the need for separate forums for Aboriginal women, women of colour, lesbians and women with disabilities who have very few opportunities to meet and network as a group.

There were several suggestions to enhance information exchanges, including the creation of a "one-stop shopping" directory of all women-serving organizations and agencies, Web sites, a province-wide newsletter, more conferences, regional workshops and update bulletins.

Involving Women in Planning and Policy Development

Women suggested they need a voice in government in order to keep the equality dialogue open, the issues alive, and the solutions effective and compatible with women's needs. They also stressed the need to be inclusive of all women in the process — those who are most marginalized, and those with additional barriers to social and economic equality.

A number of participants suggested that women should be more fully involved in the design and implementation of any policies, programs or legislation that affects women.

Others encouraged the formation of Advisory Councils for women of colour, lesbians, women with disabilities, and Aboriginal and Métis women, to ensure policies and programs reflect their special needs.

Women also suggested government should foster community initiatives and involve communities in planning programs and policies, to ensure they fit local needs and are appropriate for all women of the community. They pointed to the need for workshops on developing community or project funding proposals.

Representation on Boards, Commissions, and in Management Positions

A number of participants applauded the government's success in increasing women's representation on provincial Boards and Commissions, and called for a redoubled effort to boost women's participation.

Women also encouraged each other to press for the advancement of young women and for the promotion of women into leadership positions in their respective agencies. They also identified the need to assist women to achieve more power in their own communities.

Government Accountability

The Ministry of Women's Equality was recognized as women's leading advocate within government. As such, the ministry was encouraged to continue its efforts to place issues concerning women's economic equality on the government agenda and to report back to women on a regular basis about progress.

An annual Economic Round Table was proposed as a mechanism to assess progress and make further recommendations. Women also suggested the creation of ongoing working groups comprised of government, business and labour, to continue to explore solutions and advance the equality agenda.

And a number of participants urged the government to form a multi-ministry strategy to address women's economic equality.

Others expressed the hope that these public consultation forums would be just the beginning of a stronger relationship with the ministry. They recommended future forums to ensure the dialogue continues.

Gender Analysis of Government Initiatives

Participants suggested the Ministry of Women's Equality has a central and crucial role to play by encouraging and supporting other government ministries to include a gender impact analysis in all their legislative, policy and program initiatives.

Some participants urged legislation to ensure gender impact analysis is included in all government decisions.

Valued Voices

"Change will happen when we listen to one another, rather than staying rigid in our thinking." — Conference comment

For too long, the voices and views of women were excluded from decision-making. This has changed over recent years. This public consultation was our most comprehensive to date, and presented a valuable opportunity for the ministry to listen to women of all ages, from a wide diversity of economic, social, and cultural backgrounds.

We heard a range of concerns, and a variety of proposed solutions.

And we heard that, by working together, we can realize our shared vision of a society where all women have equality in all aspects of their lives.

We respect the many insights and ideas offered. They will help us to shape an economic strategy for women, and will move us closer to realizing that vision.

Over the past number of months, more than 1200 women in B.C. contributed their time and their ideas as part of their ongoing commitment to women's equality. The ministry has taken all this valued input into consideration. We are developing plans based on what was voiced. Later in the year, the ministry will release an Action Plan that will address many of the issues and ideas that were heard. Together, we can take many small and larger steps and make giant gains in our ongoing effort to achieve full and lasting economic and social equality for all women of the province.

The following pages provide a more detailed accounting of the feedback we received in each of the consultations.

Written Submissions

The ministry received numerous detailed written submissions in response to an invitation to comment on the variety of proposed measures outlined in the paper. Most submissions came from organizations representing significant numbers of people — women-serving organizations, business organizations and unions. In some cases, responding groups collaborated with other organizations to prepare their submissions.

While respondents presented a range of opinions and recommendations, there was an underlying theme that government needs to act on a variety of fronts to address the wide range of interrelated issues that affect women's social and economic status.

Emerging Issues

Child Care

A recurring issue in most of the submissions was the need for more accessible and affordable, quality child care. Child care is viewed by most as a fundamental prerequisite to full social and economic equality. Respondents noted that women are primary caregivers in the home and as such, are often limited by the cost or lack of quality child care. An improved child care system would allow women to more fully participate in the paid workforce, pursue further training or take advantage of community support programs and services.

Elder care

Similarly, there was strong support for elder care programs and assistance to relieve the growing financial and personal stresses that an increasing number of people, mostly women, face as they take on the responsibility of caring for aging relatives. In the words of one respondent:

"Males or females who are looking after elderly parents should be able to receive compensation for their time. Women have been performing unpaid labour with no recognition for far too long, which is a major contributor to the inequity in our economic system."

A number of organizations urged the government to make funding available for special needs transportation, special diets and training about caring for the elderly. They also suggest an expansion of services enabling the elderly to live on their own as a way to ease women's responsibilities.

Other organizations suggested income tax relief for those caring for elderly relatives and supportive collective agreement provisions. The need for respite care was also emphasized.

Pay Equity

Most submissions identified inequitable wages as an inherent barrier to economic equality. A majority of respondents favoured pay equity legislation applied to all sectors of the economy. The preferred view was that a proactive rather than a complaint-based model would be the most effective. Some noted that a complaint-based model disadvantages the more dependent party in the employer-employee relationship, and women are most likely to be in that position.

"The onus should not be on the individual woman to initiate the process to redress an inequity that is rightly a social responsibility."

Many suggested that male-dominated organizations will not respond to a voluntary or compliance-based approach. As one respondent suggested:

"Employers like to pay as little as possible to employees and often try to get away with not following the rules...."

Few submissions favoured a voluntary approach. Respondents cited the fact that each employment situation is likely to have different needs and requirements. Only one respondent supported a contract compliance model. Most criticism of this model centred on the fact that it is most likely to "affect only larger companies that bid on government contracts, and would leave most women in traditional women's jobs unaffected by pay equity."

Others expressed frustration with existing structures and rules and argued:

"We support a legislative approach that is both proactive and complaint-driven because already existing legislation that is meant to protect women from inordinate exploitation, does not work. A complaint hotline, for example, would offer isolated women access to government officials and take employer abuse out of the closet."

Many respondents noted that B.C. has lagged behind other Canadian jurisdictions with regard to legislated pay equity.

Many respondents articulated the critical need to provide practical assistance to employers to ensure smooth implementation of the legislation. Some suggested training could be supported through tax incentives and government contract opportunities.

Low Wage Redress

Few respondents, mostly from women's organizations, voiced an opinion on the issue. Of those who did, some supported low wage redress through collective bargaining, while others supported a legislative approach. Some did not support it at all.

Minimum Wage Increases

There was significant support for increasing the minimum wage to assist women, who represent 74 per cent of minimum wage earners aged 25 and over.

Access to Non-Traditional Training and Mentorship Programs

Many respondents emphasized the need for increased education and training with financial assistance for young women. This, they said, will help to qualify them for better-paying non-traditional jobs, especially in smaller rural and remote areas.

One respondent pointed to the need for a careful review of entrance requirements for non-traditional positions noting that historically, many positions included qualifying requirements such as physical strength that were by definition, biased against women and not necessarily related to the job.

Mentorship and other support programs were also seen as critical to encourage women to consider these more financially rewarding positions.

Employer Training
Many of the respondent organizations noted that women-friendly, family-friendly workplace practices will not become a reality until employers fully understand and appreciate the consequences of persistent discrimination and workplace harassment and abuse. They urged the government to invest in and facilitate awareness and educational training programs for employers.

Entrepreneurial Assistance
Respondents noted that an increasing number of women in B.C. are considering self-employment and starting up their own businesses. They expressed a concern that many women do not enter on a level playing field with their male counterparts. A number stressed the importance of lending programs that meet the specific needs of women.

Encouraging Leadership
A key to ending women's dependency is developing their unique abilities to take on leadership roles — in all of their endeavours. This was articulated clearly by a Surrey city councillor:

"Women must be encouraged and mentored to reach their goals and it is important that we help women learn about networking."

Others echoed this view, pointing out that women tend to be very active on boards and commissions in the voluntary sector but have great difficulty breaking into these positions in the private sector.

Ageism
While many of the written submissions focused on the needs of younger women, some respondents stressed the need for pension reforms to support older women who have limited, if any, paid work experience. Others suggested that many older women still face discrimination when seeking paid work.

Income Tax and Pension Reform
A number of submissions referenced the need for income tax and pension reforms to recognize the unpaid contributions of stay-at-home caregivers and volunteers.

Suggestions

Although respondents raised numerous concerns and issues, they also delivered a number of concrete suggestions for action. These are categorized under the four key themes outlined in the discussion paper.

Closing the Wage Gap
> Legislate a proactive pay equity model that sets standards for all employers, including those in the broader public sector.
> Invite community comment on all aspects of the legislation.
> Provide training and practical assistance to employers to ensure smooth implementation of pay equity legislation.
> Increase awareness and education to employers and employees on equity values.

> Devise means to address the distinctive pay equity needs and requirements that arise from different employment situations.
> Explore incorporation of a complaint-driven process to ensure compliance with the legislation (e.g. a complaint hotline.)
> Explore innovative ways to fund training and assistance initiatives (e.g. tax incentives and government contract opportunities.)
> Encourage women to enter non-traditional occupations by implementing programs such as cost sharing financial assistance and evaluation of entrance requirements.

Closing the Poverty Gap

> Improve access to training and education — especially English language training for immigrant women and more Bridging programs.
> Explore support requirements for women in need, especially younger women, single mothers, seniors and those with special needs.
> Explore the role of lending programs, more explicitly, micro-lending programs that address the specific needs of women.
> Explore income tax and pension reforms for stay-at-home care-givers and volunteers.

Supporting Women, Children and Families

> Increase access to high quality, affordable, flexible and culturally sensitive child care.
> Provide funding for services to help with care of the elderly.
> Implement income tax breaks for those caring for elderly relatives.
> Negotiate collective agreement provisions that extend special leave for those caring for the elderly.
> Implement respite care programs as part of a broader elder care initiative.

Increasing Women's Representation in Positions of Influence

> Establish a business and labour working group to develop solutions and advance the agenda overall.
> Facilitate the implementation of mentorship programs and community supports.
> Establish a women's economic round table to meet annually to assess progress on all fronts and make further recommendations.
> Clearly define methods to enhance the creation of women's networks.
> Re-double efforts to increase women's representation on provincial government boards and commissions.
> Explore ways to support ongoing processes that will advance the overall agenda.

Kamloops Regional Forum, June 16, 2000

Kamloops, population 80,000, is adjacent to a large Aboriginal reserve. Kamloops is a service centre for surrounding cattle ranching and lumbering operations. Tourism and provincial government operations provide additional employment opportunities. The average income for women is $18,972 compared to $32,904 for men.
(Source: 1996 Census, Statistics Canada)

Among the forum's 72 participants there was a strong representation from Aboriginal women and much of the discussion focused on meeting their unique needs. Discussions also reflected the particular local circumstances of women in the Kamloops area — a community with a high proportion of single-parent families headed by women, and a large number of part-time, service industry jobs.

"Interesting that you started in Kamloops. Kamloops has the highest rate [per capita basis] of single moms … if we don't get value for the work we do … this is a social issue."

"If you look at women living on the reservation, we are below the poverty line, barely exist, we still have to exist, hold our head up with pride …. I'm going into self-employment. But I'm getting tired of being a pioneer …. I want something established soon."

Emerging Issues

Attitudes

Kamloops women want respect and recognition for both their paid and unpaid contributions on all fronts. This was a theme echoed by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal participants. Many women said deeply rooted, sexist attitudes about women persist in their community and suggested this precludes equality. "We're a big city, but our mentality is little," one suggested. Another called on members of her community to "have more of a sense of compassion — to change their perceptions of single poor mothers," while yet another suggested "people who are poor are treated as suspect. It's no crime to be poor." A number of the participants said that these ingrained attitudes ultimately erode self-esteem. One woman stressed there is a solution.

"It goes back to education … get the self-esteem to say I can and I will … and other women will follow … create opportunities for education."

Repeatedly, women suggested there is no value attributed to the work they do at home. They spoke of the stigma attached to being an unpaid stay-at-home parent. The women called for more initiatives to enhance economic self-reliance — both outside and inside the home. In the words of one woman:

"There has to be something in place for both those who want to work outside the home and those who want to work inside the home... dignity and respect either way."

Child Care and Elder Care
Affordable and flexible child care is clearly an issue for Kamloops women, especially among the large number of single mothers in the community.

"Back to the child care issue... I've heard that it can be used to break the cycle... we've got to have subsidized child care, but we need to do more for children aged 0–3 years. Let's start putting some money at this age group. And let's try to work with businesses more to introduce family-friendly workplaces. It's not just about child care... we need to look at elder care policies in the workplace as well."

Others suggested there is a need for more flexible child care, noting that large numbers of women work evening shifts in the hospitality industry. One woman stressed the need for schools to provide child care for teenage mothers.

Maternity Leave
Extended maternity leave was also seen as important, and another way to recognize the true value of women's work in the home.

Housing
The lack of affordable, social housing is viewed as a critical local issue.

"It is the biggest issue... there's a backlash about social housing in Kamloops... concern about creating poverty areas, ghettos... [I] want to correct the impression about the John Howard proposal. It isn't dangerous people; elderly women are included in the application."

Shelter subsidies were also an issue. An Aboriginal woman spoke of the disparity in housing and other subsidies for women living on reserves and called for legislation to provide more equitable supports.

Pay Equity
Wage disparity was cited as a major barrier to economic equality, and there was general support for legislated pay equity. A CUPE representative urged the government to implement proactive, legislated pay equity and spoke of the "tremendous burden" a complaint-based pay equity model places on women. She recounted the story of the struggles of a female fire dispatcher who earned $15,000 less than her male counterparts and dared to complain.

Many cited the unique disadvantages of Aboriginal women, especially those living on-reserve who are covered by federal jurisdiction. "If you are an Aboriginal woman, your annual income is $9,000 less than a non-Aboriginal."

And there was concern that many of the jobs in the area are part-time and may not be covered by pay equity legislation.

Entrepreneurial Assistance
Participants noted that many local women attempt to start their own businesses as an alternative to the limited employment opportunities and low wages in the community. They discussed their difficulty finding loans officers who are sensitive to women's requirements. However, one woman pointed to some progress in

this area. She proudly noted the record of The All Nations Trust Company, a lending institution wholly owned by Aboriginals.

"We don't see barriers. We deal with everyone equally.... Thirty-one per cent of our portfolio is for women. Only two of our loans to women were a loss. Shows we can do it."

Education and Training

Education was depicted as key to women's economic security. There was a call for a greater investment in education and training at all levels, including workplace training for Aboriginal women.

Education was also viewed as critical to reshaping attitudes about women. Numerous participants suggested it should begin in the early years, when attitudes are first shaped.

"We need to work with the Ministry of Education in high schools to inform young women of our history... of how powerful we've been... inform our daughters."

"I see a real problem in the schools with young girls getting pregnant, dropping out, ending up on social assistance. School-based day care is needed so that girls can continue school.... We need to educate boys about their responsibilities... both parental and economic."

Mentoring programs were cited as a valuable component of the education process.

"I'd like to see the recognition of Aboriginal programming... promote Aboriginal women's experiences and recognize the value of mentoring between Aboriginal women and others. I owned and operated a business on-reserve and now have a business off-reserve. I think there is a need to increase awareness and understanding of the existence of home-based businesses or working out of the home."

Another noted that mentorship programs would be of great value to older women leaving abusive relationships.

"Many of the women in the Bridging program look at starting their own business... we need a comprehensive mentorship program for women to assist them to begin their own businesses and to become more successful. We'll have more successes if we have women mentors in rural and urban areas."

Social Assistance

There was general concern that social assistance benefits are insufficient. A number of women called for an end to policies that penalize women who work part time to supplement their benefits. The time limit for employment earnings exceptions was seen as too restrictive, given that delivering financial independence through full-time employment was not always an option for women.

One woman suggested the Family Maintenance Program has "no teeth."

"We've had two occasions where women who came from abusive relationships were doubly disadvantaged. Family Maintenance wouldn't pursue maintenance, so two kids didn't get that extra $100 per month."

Others spoke of the need for advocates to help social assistance recipients deal with "the disrespect of staff."

Aboriginal women called on the provincial government to lobby Ottawa for legislative changes to address the disparities between on-reserve and off-reserve social assistance.

Inclusivity

One woman made a powerful plea to the government to involve marginalized women in policy and program development — to value their perspectives and honour their contributions.

"We need to get more women involved ... unemployed, women on social assistance and low-income women's voices need to be heard. [Government] needs to establish an honorarium for their participation in federal, provincial and municipal initiatives .... If you include these women, you will get a whole perspective ... they can represent themselves."

Suggestions

Closing the Wage Gap

> Legislate pay equity.
> Explore the role of lending programs to address the specific needs of women starting their own businesses or business co-operatives.

Closing the Poverty Gap

> Improve access to more training and education.
> Increase awareness and education programs on equity values.
> Improve support benefits for younger women, single mothers, seniors and women with special needs.
> Review subsidy disparities on- and off-reserve.
> Increase availability of affordable housing.
> Develop workplace training programs for Aboriginal women.
> Increase awareness and education to employers on equity values.
> Work with federal government to correct imbalances on- and off-reserve.

Supporting Women, Children and Families

> Provide access to high-quality, flexible, affordable child care, including in schools and workplaces.
> Review support programs and tuition levels for younger women, students and single mothers.
> Increase availability of affordable housing.
> Consider social assistance advocates.
> Extend maternity leave.

Increasing Women's Representation in Positions of Influence

> Facilitate implementation of mentorship programs.
> Involve women in program development at federal, provincial and municipal levels and provide compensation for their contributions.
> Implement or facilitate mentorship programs.

Kelowna Regional Forum, June 17, 2000

Kelowna, population approximately 100,000, is in the heart of the Okanagan. The economy of the region is based on fruit growing and processing, winemaking, lumbering and tourism. The average income for women is $18,739 compared to $29,996 for men.

(Source: 1996 Census, Statistics Canada)

There was major participation from visible minority women among the 60 participants. Much of the discussion reflected their particular concerns about language barriers, discrimination, and the lack of recognition for degrees they had obtained outside Canada.

"Minority women are still dealing with barriers to inclusivity — they are so far behind, they can't even start dealing with issues such as the minimum wage, management positions for women, etc. Minority women can learn from the mainstream women regarding bringing a voice to government..."

Emerging Issues

Education and Training

Whether the words came from highly educated visible minority women whose foreign degrees are not recognized, or from single mothers struggling to make ends meet, women in Kelowna spoke repeatedly about education and its correlation with economic security. Affordable, accessible education was viewed as the key to unlocking the door to better opportunities in a city where many women are trapped in low-paying, part-time jobs.

Access to education and training was seen as limited for a variety of reasons: the costs associated with training, tuition fees, student loan repayment regimes, and a general lack of interest on the part of employers to encourage women.

"We have degrees from other countries, but now we work minimum wage jobs. I need advanced English to work in my field, yet I can't afford to pay. The minimum funded ESL is inadequate for me."

"Women are under-represented in apprenticeships — nothing significant has happened in the last 10 years in getting adult women into apprenticeships. We need employers who are more involved in training and in getting women economically independent."

The education issue was discussed from a variety of angles. Some urged more ready access:

"We need to provide training/education for the big-dollar vocations."

Others emphasized the need for education programs to bolster women's self-esteem and self-sufficiency. Several women emphasized the need for life skills, parenting and marriage skills training for boys as well as girls, suggesting this would help to embed equity values.

Violence

Violence and abuse against women was characterized as a growing concern and a major deterrent to economic security for an increasing number of women.

"Women and children's experience of violence affects their ability to access the workplace and education; they need support to become more able to access even minimum wage jobs. More funding is needed... Women's experience of violence has continued to grow. Hardly anything else matters until we address the issue of violence against women."

Employment

The prevalence of part-time, low-wage jobs is a major barrier to economic security for Kelowna women. Some cited the area's dependency on the tourism and hospitality industry as the reason for this. Another woman suggested the "old boys' network" limits the number of financially rewarding full-time positions for women.

"The Okanagan is not the best place for women. There is not much opportunity for high-paying jobs — only minimum wage jobs. It's not what you know, but who you know in the Okanagan."

One woman stressed the need to recognize the unpaid contribution of volunteers, most of whom are women.

Poverty

According to a number of women, the struggle to survive is an issue for the unemployed, the working poor and for mothers who are single parents. One participant called for more affordable housing for women, especially for single parents living in "sub-standard" quarters.

Another spoke of "unenlightened" attitudes that deprive women.

"Some policies on employing women are very unenlightened. Women are in part-time work and have no benefits — they are the working poor and are trapped."

And still others spoke to the issue of poverty among women, suggesting that their inability to obtain recognition for their foreign degrees was a major barrier to their economic security.

"As a visible minority woman I have fallen through the cracks. I have a lot of transferable skills, but I have no computer training. I have no Income Assistance or Employment Insurance access. I am getting some re-entry training, but it doesn't meet my needs and I can't get the training that will."

Generally, most viewed social assistance benefits as inadequate, and participants called for greater coordination and integration with federal programs.

Pay Equity

While issues of education, employment and poverty dominated the conversations, there was discussion about pay equity. Those who spoke to the issue favoured a proactive, legislated model.

"Equal pay for woman for work of equal value — men get paid more for the same jobs. This needs to be protected in legislation. We need a mechanism for people to file complaints — an ombuds-type of process to provide redress."

Another participant recommended that the Ministry of Women's Equality examine carefully its funding to service agencies:

"I work in a family centre where we are dedicated to pay equity. The MWE dollars for one FTE program is about $10,000 short compared to contracts with the Ministry of Children and Families and the Ministry of Housing. MWE must be seen as firmly on side with pay equity — they must be "squeaky clean" and cannot have contracts which don't compare in price."

Ageism

A range of concerns was raised about the plight of older women — from discrimination in hiring practices to the lack of pensions and support programs.

"As a stay-at-home mom, I get no money now and no pension or support when I am older."

"As an older worker — don't tell me I'm over-qualified. In Canada we don't value seniors' experience. How do we address that?"

Inclusivity

Several participants suggested the provincial government has an opportunity to play a valuable role in facilitating more integrated, community-focused social development and planning, to involve and benefit women.

Suggestions

Closing the Wage Gap

> Legislate pay equity.
> Explore how to incorporate a complaint-driven process to ensure compliance.
> Review impact of pay equity on social service agencies

Closing the Poverty Gap

> Improve access to training and education, especially language training for visible minority women.
> Address the issue of recognizing foreign degrees for immigrant and refugee women.
> Improve social assistance supports for young women, single parents, the working poor and senior women.
> Implement community-based social planning mechanisms that involve women.
> Develop education and awareness programs on equity values.
> Review and address the special needs of women leaving abusive relationships.
> Work toward greater integration and coordination of programs with the federal government.
> Explore taxation of banks to fund front-line agencies.
> Provide more supports for victims of abuse.

Supporting Women, Children and Families

> Improve social assistance supports for young women, single parents, the working poor and senior women.
> Increase availability of affordable housing.
> Explore supports for stay-at-home caregivers.

Increasing Women's Representation in Positions of Influence

> Facilitate community-based social planning and involve women.

Prince George Regional Forum, June 23, 2000

Prince George has a population of 81,000. Historically, the economy has been based on the mining, oil and gas, and forestry industries — all of which are at the vagary of the international market. There has recently been a marked shift to the service industry, which now employs the vast majority of workers. The average income for women is $20,059 compared to $36,249 for men.

(Source: 1996 Census, Statistics Canada)

Much of the discussion among the 69 participants reflected the sense of isolation women feel in smaller, more remote, resource-based communities, and the impact this has on their lives.

"There is an uncertain economy. If my husband gets an opportunity, that becomes the priority."

"Shift work is hard on families. Families are better off with two smaller incomes than one large income, but people do the shift work for the extra money."

"We're reaching a crisis as the resource centres begin to downturn. The majority of women work in the service sector; as there are layoffs in the resource industries, women who make minimum wages now have to support families. Women are making more like twenty-five cents on the dollar, compared to men in resource communities."

Emerging Issues

Attitudes

The women of Prince George say they constantly battle attitude problems. Numerous participants reiterated the problem, saying sexism and discrimination persist, and the resulting toll on women is draining.

"The issue is in the attitudes. People see women's economic issues as issues of 'women's libbers' or 'bra burners,' but it is an issue of care for disabled children, for children with mental health problems or care for adult children and for other reasons... women are caregivers for husbands... and for aging parents. Women aren't valued for their caregiving roles."

"There is no concept of how far Prince George is away from the Lower Mainland. I'm from Victoria originally. There's racism, sexism, big cowboy hats and treating girlfriends like chattels here."

Isolation

The sense of isolation experienced by many women in the area is compounded by their distance from social and medical services,

education, and other support systems. The impact of costs associated with access to these services, particularly transportation costs, was voiced repeatedly.

"Medical care is really a women's issue, as women need more care. There is a lack of options in health care and there are not enough doctors. Women come from all over the North to access health care — they have to drive for care. It is the women who are also responsible for children's care."

"I just started working with a women's group, working with violence issues. The Stop the Violence counselor only works seven hours a week. If you have a substance abuse problem, you need a detoxification centre, or a place to dry out. We have no Safe Home...."

"There are a lot of communities in the North, not just Prince George and Terrace — there's a lot of little communities. Money gets spread around the bigger centres and little communities are left hanging. There are transportation issues. People can't afford to get from one community to another."

Child Care and Elder Care

Participants called for improved access to high-quality, more flexible child care that accommodates the needs of shift workers. This coupled with financial support for stay-at-home mothers will relieve much of the social and financial pressures associated with caregiving. One woman suggested the need for a national child care strategy.

Women underlined the need for a fundamental societal change that truly recognizes and values women's total contribution — in the home, as well as in the workplace. A number of solutions were proposed, including a guaranteed minimum wage and Canada Pension Plan benefits for caregivers in the home.

"We should have a guaranteed minimum salary so women working at home, looking after children and [the] elderly, would be guaranteed a minimum salary to recognize their work as important work."

"I remarried and now have a four-year-old and a three-year-old. I didn't intend to work but my husband was laid off, so I went back to work part-time. Day care was expensive, and I went into debt. I'm now considering full-time work... these are tough choices and I'm very tired! My doctor says that over 30 per cent of his patients are women of whom the world expects too much."

While the focus of the caregiving issue was on children, a number of participants spoke of the looming crisis of elder care, noting that growing numbers of women are juggling these responsibilities as well.

Pay Equity

When asked about supporting the notion of pay equity, virtually all who voiced an opinion supported the concept.

"I am 32 now and have never left the workforce except for maternity leave. I have seen the pay equity gap — a male equivalent got $15,000 more."

"At the City of Prince George you can have a two-year Finance Diploma, work in accounting and earn two dollars an hour less than an asphalt layer with a Grade 8 education."

And from a union member's perspective:

"Pay equity is one of those things the labour movement has been working on — a building block to equality for women. Once we have equal standing in the community, we can contribute equally to the economic well-being of our families and our communities."

Education and Training
In more remote, smaller communities, the availability of education, on-the-job training and re-entry programs is clearly an issue. Participants said transportation costs and student loan repayment regimes make education unattainable for many. Others noted that often, those who do go elsewhere for training don't return. This ultimately costs the community.

"Nurses need to go away to update their training and then they don't come back. We lose professionals this way."

"In other countries, loans are forgiven if you go back to isolated communities and use your skills there. This will help to get the education needed to work at higher-paying jobs."

Some of the solutions proposed were free education, tax incentives to business for training, student loans based on women's wages, more flexible loan repayment plans and a review of accreditation requirements.

While formal education was the focus of much of the discussion, there was also a call for education programs to combat sexism, racism and discrimination.

"One of the pieces that is relevant — and I've only been in Prince George for two years — there is a significant difference in the attitudes applied to women, visible minorities, and the otherwise disadvantaged. We need to educate our communities, neighbours, friends and families."

Entrepreneurship
Mentoring programs, lending programs geared to women's needs, and benefits for women in home-based businesses were among the ideas suggested to help make self-employment a more attractive option to low-paying, part-time jobs.

Poverty
There was a call for income tax reforms and increased social assistance benefits to ease the financial burden of the unemployed, the working poor and single mothers. A number of women spoke of the hardships of poverty, and shared stories of their struggles. One woman's words reveal the frustration of day-to-day life:

"I am on assistance and have two kids. I'm a hairdresser, a hard industry to get into, especially here [in] Prince George. I'm back on Income Assistance. I can get student loans and bursaries for post-secondary education, but there's no money to help upgrading to grade 12. It is impossible to save even $30 when you're on assistance ... I have to walk everywhere; transit is too expensive ... you have to take the kids with you if they're sick ... you can't get day care until you have a job. You can't pound the pavement looking for work and get child care."

Others spoke of the lack of a Women's Centre, a Safe House and important medical services.

Ageism

The plight of older women was identified as an issue in Prince George — from discrimination in the workplace to the lack of supports and adequate pensions for senior women.

"There's a serious problem with employers not recognizing the advantages of employing an older person. The quality of my work is very good, but I still get passed over for younger men."

Suggestions

Closing the Wage Gap

> Legislate pay equity with built-in complaint mechanisms.
> Review recognition of foreign degrees for immigrant and refugee women.

Closing the Poverty Gap

> Increase access and funding for job re-entry and trades training.
> Provide transportation subsidies for those in need.
> Review tuition levels and student loan repayment requirements.
> Provide free education.
> Provide tax and other incentives to business for on-the-job training.
> Examine the specific needs of Aboriginal women.
> Implement education programs to increase self-esteem.
> Provide guaranteed minimum wage for at-home caregivers.
> Implement income tax and pension reforms for at-home caregivers and senior women.
> Provide benefits for women in home-based businesses.
> Implement student loans based on income.
> Increase awareness and education for employers and employees on equity values.
> Review social support requirements for women in need, including financial assistance, Safe Houses, Women's Centres, etc.
> Recognize the special needs of smaller, more remote communities
> Develop education and awareness programs on equity values.

Supporting Women, Children and Families

> Increase access to high-quality, affordable and flexible child care.
> Increase availability of affordable housing.
> Implement income tax and pension reforms for caregivers in the home, seniors and widows.
> Improve access to medical services.
> Provide dental care for children of the working poor.

Increasing Women's Representation in Positions of Influence

> Involve women in the development of mentorship and community social service programs.
> Increase training and educational opportunities.
> Facilitate mentoring programs.
> Facilitate the implementation of mentorship programs.
> Develop community-based job strategies for resource-based centres.

Victoria Regional Forum, September 11, 2000

The Greater Victoria area has a population of approximately 205,000. The economy of the area is largely dependent on tourism, agriculture and government operations. The average annual income for women is $21,758 compared to $27,256 for men.
(Source: 1996 Census, Statistics Canada)

One hundred and forty-four women from the city and surrounding communities attended the forum, including a large contingency from various Bridging programs in the area. Much of the discussion centred on the specific concerns of particular groups, including the disabled, women of colour, those with mental health issues and older women.

There was an emphasis on the need for improved child care and elder care and greater recognition of the value of women's unpaid work.

Emerging Issues

Income Tax and Pension Reforms
There was strong support for pension and income tax reforms and other benefits to support at-home caregivers and low-income women. In the words of one participant:

"Government relies on women to pick up the social slack. Unpaid or poorly paid labour falls to women — this extra shift of labour limits women's economic and human potential. We need more home care and disability benefits. We need to pay now, or we will pay later."

And from another:

"Regarding the issue of abuse in the home — even if a woman is paid to be an at-home mom, the abuser will take these dollars. We really need an integrated approach to dealing with these issues."

Among those who spoke to these issues, the sentiments were deep.

"Women work for free in the home looking after children and are forever penalized for doing that unpaid work. Every man who has a woman in the home doing unpaid work has a huge advantage in the workforce."

Child Care and Elder Care

As elsewhere, there was strong support for more flexible and accessible child care, and an alert that elder care requirements will continue to grow as the population ages.

"Elder care is a big issue. Now there are 15 people for every one over 65. In a few years there will be three people for every one over 65.... Often women are the caregivers. If women burn out, this increases the burden on the health care system. We need respite care and transportation to social activities etc."

A number of women complained that staying home as a caregiver has "gotten a bad rap" and that women's unpaid contributions go largely unrecognized.

This view was carried over in a discussion about salaried child care workers.

"My daughter is a well-qualified child care worker and makes very low wages with no benefits. There is an issue here of people taking care of our most valuable resource who are paid 'peanuts'."

Inclusivity

For the most part, participants spoke from their perspectives as representatives of the most disadvantaged groups. They called on the government to be more sensitive to the needs of these women when developing strategies to deal with poverty, support systems and economic security. The concern was raised repeatedly:

"I have a concern that [women of colour] are being very quiet and that there aren't many here. Women of colour feel abandoned by the women's movement and want full equality...."

"I haven't heard people talk about mental illness and poverty — whether educated or not, if a woman has a mental illness, she will be discriminated against.... You need to have an integrated look at women and mental illness."

"Women with disabilities are the poorest people around, and not only poor but disadvantaged. The ministry needs to take a serious look at this and be an advocate."

Pay Equity

A number of women spoke to the complexity of the pay equity issue. While all those who had an opinion generally favoured pay equity, there were concerns that it could have a detrimental effect on service agencies. There were mixed views on whether pay equity should be legislated.

"Pay equity, even in government, is difficult to get. You need to have legislated pay equity, otherwise, it won't happen."

"Stats for women with disabilities regarding pay equity are not good. We need to target specific initiatives. It should be voluntary rather than legislated. A heavy-handed approach doesn't change attitudes...."

Some challenged the government to put its own house in order and review its funding of women-serving organizations. A representative of one organization said that current funding is inadequate to pay fair wages. She urged the ministry to consider the impact of pay equity on the service sector.

"Legislated pay equity which demands changes in existing wage scales may end up in closing more agencies — is that worse than disparate wages?"

Education and Training

Women stressed the need for enhanced educational supports, underlining the importance of training for non-traditional occupations. However, one woman suggested that young women must also expand their horizons.

"Education is crucial — we need more women considering non-traditional careers. Many women still have pipe dreams of being taken care of by a husband and then they end up in their 20s with two children, no husband and in poverty. Young women need to pursue science and math."

One woman who spent years in non-traditional work warned that there are workplace hurdles to overcome in some non-traditional fields. She spoke of having "to endure abuse and emotional stress," questioning whether much has changed.

Another echoed the frustration, suggesting that governments should play a stronger advocacy role, protecting women at risk.

"I have worked in non-traditional roles — clergy and chaplainry in the military. To be a woman in a non-traditional area and in communities where there isn't advocacy puts a woman at risk."

Participants also suggested women need to be more supportive of each other. They underlined the importance of mentorship programs to help women assume their place in the economy and called on the government to work more closely with the private sector to encourage workplace mentoring. One recommended that women who mentor on the job should receive compensation.

"Governments could be more proactive in developing skill-building with individuals via mentorships. In corporations, women don't support each other and women don't mentor."

While the focus in education was on the need for increased training opportunities, high tuition costs and student loans were highlighted as a significant barrier.

Employment

The prevalence of poorly paid, part-time jobs and contract work in Victoria was an issue. Some women spoke of the economic consequences for women doing this type of work — no pensions, no benefits and a constant sense of financial insecurity.

Aboriginal Issues

Jurisdictional issues between the federal and provincial governments were cited as an obstacle directly affecting both on- and off-reserve women. Participants called for a more integrated approach between the two levels of government to address child care, elder care and transportation subsidies.

Suggestions

Closing the Wage Gap

> Implement pay equity.
> Examine the impact of pay equity on social service agencies.

Closing the Poverty Gap

> Review social support needs of women.
> Provide universal pension plans for caregivers in the home.
> Consider income tax reforms to ease financial burden on the working poor and recognize the value of parenting and elder care.
> Address federal/provincial jurisdictional disparities pertaining to Aboriginal programs.
> Develop a better integrated and coordinated approach to social policy and program development.
> Increase funding for life-skills programs and non-traditional job training.
> Be more inclusive and sensitive to the special needs of Aboriginal women, women of colour and women with disabilities.
> Review tuition levels and student loan repayment requirements.
> Reassess wages of child care workers.
> Create programs to develop self-esteem in female students.

Supporting Women, Children and Families

> Provide financial assistance for stay-at-home parents.
> Increase access to high-quality, flexible, affordable, child care.
> Implement income tax and pension reforms for at-home caregivers.
> Provide respite care and transportation subsidies to caregivers.
> Enforce employment standards in the workplace.
> Develop awareness and education programs on equity values.

Increasing Women's Representation in Positions of Influence

> Be more inclusive in the development of policies and programs.
> Establish or facilitate mentorship programs and compensate those who mentor in the workplace.
> Facilitate community-based social planning and involve women.
> Implement networking channels for women.

Nanaimo Regional Forum, September 12, 2000

Nanaimo, population approximately 76,000, was once dependent on the coal mining industry. The economy is now focused on lumbering, pulp processing, shipbuilding, and the fishing, agricultural and tourism industries. The average annual income of women is $18,575 compared to $29,969 for men.
(Source: 1996 Census, Statistics Canada)

The 93 participants from Nanaimo and surrounding communities centred much of their attention on solutions to combat poverty, recognize stay-at-home mothers and overcome the hurdles of starting a small business. A number of women made impassioned pleas to the ministry to listen more carefully to women and to be more sensitive to their circumstances. In the words of a Cowichan Valley woman:

"People who are poor go into survival mode. [Government] needs to consult people who are poor and understand that. We're in a fluid system. Rather than attaching identity to incomes, we need to attach pride to who we are — and that we are survivors. Those issues need to be built into services — Income Assistance offices. Speaking to a worker through bulletproof glass is not a way to create pride."

Income Tax and Pension Reform
Repeatedly, there were calls for income tax and pension reforms to give women the choice to stay at home to raise their children.

"Society needs to appreciate women, no matter what their choices are. Female attributes, nurturing etc., need to be valued. Respect for women's work, women's choices — raising children needs to be valued. Economic equality is more than just making money if you go out to work...."

And from others:

"Reform the tax system, even out the playing field."

"Restructure taxation for stay-at-home parents to give a dollar value for pension plans."

"Provide financial support for at-home parents; value children — if we value children, we will value caregivers who stay at home with them."

Maternity Leave
A woman who teaches women's studies was particularly concerned about inadequate maternity leave provisions. She had the following suggestion:

"Teachers at the college have earned pay equity, but fall behind in lifetime earnings when they take time out for maternity leave. This should not be a bargaining issue because it inevitably gets lost [is given up in negotiations]. Maternity benefits should be topped up and pension benefits maintained during leave."

Pay Equity

Among those who expressed an opinion, there was general support for pay equity. Most agreed on the need for legislation with enforcement provisions for all sectors.

"Pay equity needs to be legislated — mandated, forced. We have had a terrible struggle to get employers on board, even with the current support. It needs to be mandated and facilitated."

Concern was expressed that women in part-time jobs may not benefit. One woman suggested legislation to limit the number of part-time employees an organization can hire.

While there was general support for the legislation, there were some diverging views. One woman suggested there are higher priorities.

"Government is well intentioned, but as government makes systemic changes it starts from the top and moves to the bottom — it affects the marginalized last. We must use a guiding principle — we must create legislation that protects the most marginalized in our society."

Poverty

The discussions on poverty focused on the need for a review of social assistance levels and a more integrated and coordinated approach to program delivery. There was also a call for a gender analysis of the poverty issue.

In the words of one participant:

"I have serious questions whether current initiatives are working. The Family Bonus [is] incorporated with the feds, so that money comes off welfare and women are getting less. Who is the government talking to on this? They should be talking to women working the front lines... There has to be a standard of living put in place for everyone. Women starve the last week of the month so their children can eat... what we have is not working!"

One woman called for a minimum annual income while others suggested that support for stay-at-home mothers would help alleviate the financial stresses many families experience.

A representative from a non-profit organization that provides services to immigrants spoke of the unique barriers visible minority women face.

"Many clients are not on Employment Insurance and not on Income Assistance. They fall through the cracks and there [are] no employment programs for them. I have qualified professionals who can't get into the system — can't get jobs let alone pay equity. One hundred per cent of the programs are made for 70 per cent of the people."

And another woman spoke of her struggles trying to pay off student loans — and the ironies inherent in student loan programs.

"I have a $32,000 loan and my husband works for $7.00 an hour. If I work, my student loan kicks in and I get less than I would now. I am angry because I have intelligence, gifts, and I can't break out. I have to borrow money from my son's paper route to make it through to the end of my husband's pay period..."

Attitudes

A number of women expressed frustration about persistent attitudes at the core of women's inequality. One woman's comments sum up the commonly heard dilemma — many women are simply cut off from choices in their lives because of deeply rooted biases.

"The economic stability of a family is a big issue — for a stay-at-home parent it's a major decision to stay home. I have been criticized in college for not accepting shift work and for placing priority on my family — there is a stigma to making the decision to stay at home. Employers see you as a liability if you want to have children — you're not a 'team player.' Employment standards don't provide a guarantee against discrimination."

Education – Training

Discussions centred on the need for life-skills and equity values programs. In addition, there was a call for school-based programs to foster a sense of self-esteem and independence among young women.

"In school we need to help young women to wake up and smell the roses regarding having children too young. It's always the women who pay the price in terms of having children."

Inclusivity:

Several women called on government to review the unique needs of women with disabilities, and Aboriginal and visible minority women.

Suggestions

Closing the Wage Gap

> Legislate pay equity.
> Examine recognition of foreign degrees for immigrant and refugee women.

Closing the Poverty Gap

> Amend *Employment Standards Act*.
> Review unique needs of disabled, Aboriginal and visible minority women.
> Conduct gender analysis of the poverty issue.
> Implement tax and pension reforms for stay-at-home caregivers.
> Review social support requirements of women.
> Establish a minimum annual income.
> Encourage self-reliance through education.
> Implement innovative and integrated job creation strategies.
> Review tuition fees and student loan repayment requirements.
> Increase the minimum wage.
> Amend *Employment Standards Act* to combat discrimination of all forms.
> Review social support requirements for women in need, including financial assistance programs and counselling services.

Supporting Women, Children and Families

> Increase access to high-quality, affordable, flexible child care.
> Provide affordable housing.
> Implement tax breaks and pension reforms for caregivers in the home.
> Reform maternity leave provisions.
> Establish education and awareness programs on equity values.

Increasing Women's Representation in Positions of Influence

> Involve women in the development of mentorship programs and community-based

Terrace Regional Forum, September 18, 2000

social development programs. *Terrace, population approximately 14,000, is the service centre for a surrounding region with a population totalling approximately 36,000. The city is the rural northern link for communications, transportation and the resource products sector. The average annual income for women is $20,212 compared to $34,960 for men.*

(Source: 1996 Census, Statistics Canada)

Echoing the sentiments of their counterparts in Prince George, the 68 participants voiced their sense of isolation and spoke of the problems associated with accessing health services, education and training opportunities, child care and employment opportunities, as well as extended family support. There was also much emphasis on the issue of teenage pregnancy and the need for support programs to raise self-esteem.

Emerging Issues

Teenage Pregnancy

The issue of teenage pregnancy emerged as a major topic. Participants quickly linked this issue with achieving economic equality. Teenage pregnancy limits choices, closes doors and often leads to a never-ending cycle of poverty and dependence. As one woman noted:

"If we want equality we have to start from an equal place, which is not with a dependent."

According to another woman, the teen pregnancy rate in Terrace is one and a half times the provincial average. A number of women cited some of the reasons for the extraordinarily high rates:

"In small communities it's difficult to get contraceptives anonymously, and to get counselling. You can't walk down the street and get services like you can in larger centres."

Another suggested that often povercy and pregnancy go hand in hand.

"Women affected by the economic downturn come into the clinic because birth control is cheaper, but still some women are not able to afford it. I had two women in tears last week because they don't want more children but are two months behind on paying for their pills and they don't have the money to pay for their current pills."

There was a call to increase and improve instruction on sexuality and birth control, life skills, parenting skills, and the implications of child rearing. Also called for was improved access to birth control information, contraceptives and abortion services.

Child Care

The lack of adequate child care was mentioned frequently as a major barrier, as was the need for a review of child care subsidies.

"The whole Northwest is underdeveloped in the area of child care. We don't have under-three,

24-hour care for shift workers, which is a huge issue, particularly for infant and toddler care. It's also very expensive. Women literally can't afford to work."

"For a working parent there's a magical hub that keeps you dependent, an amount you reach where you're not eligible for child care subsidy… If you have a second job, you're further penalized."

A number of women suggested both small and large businesses should be encouraged to offer on-site child care.

"There is no reason why small businesses can't get together to set up a type of co-op day care. It values the employee; if you make her happy, she'll stay there and give the employer the best she has."

However one participant referred to the difficulty of getting employers on side because they worry about liability. Another suggested that women with children are often overlooked for jobs because employers consider them less desirable because they have to juggle the responsibilities of child rearing and work.

Another participant spoke of the need for more family-friendly workplaces that would consider "topping up" child care subsidies.

Many appealed for increased supports or tax breaks for stay-at-home mothers in recognition of the true value of women's work in the home.

Education

The need for non-traditional job training was emphasized. However, a number of women suggested that transportation costs and inadequate training subsidies often make it prohibitive.

"Most of us are resource-based communities' women looking at other occupations, but to get that training, we have to go south."

And, there are additional costs.

"If you have to go away for training, you need 24-hour care for two weeks, whatever… your inability to do this limits job advancement."

One woman suggested the government should fund Internet-based courses for rural and remote communities. Another proposed income tax reforms to create a more accessible and equitable system.

"When flying back and forth to Vancouver for training, I can write off the course, but not the flight or what it costs for me to be there. But the business sector can do this! It's not equitable."

Social Assistance

Support programs were generally viewed as inadequate. There was a call for more integration and coordination of benefits. A number of women said northern shelter allowances should be increased, while others suggested the need for training and transportation subsidies to make training and upgrading more accessible. A clear expression of support to compensate stay-at-home mothers was made. One participant suggested a universal minimum wage tied to the rate of inflation. More assistance is needed for victims of abuse.

Pay Equity

Those who spoke to the issue generally favoured pay equity, although a couple of participants worried that business would pass on the costs, negating the economic benefits.

Pensions
Participants suggested the Canada Pension Plan should be reformed to recognize women's unpaid work.

Empowerment and Mentoring
As the group exchanged issues and ideas, a rallying call emerged urging women to teach each other, to overcome their fears and become visible and involved at the community level, in the church and in elected positions. An elected official in attendance said:

"I'd like to encourage more women to stand up and be elected to public positions. When I ran in Rupert, I was the only woman to run at that time. We're involved in communities and boards, but we're not as involved as we could be. I ran for election because a woman told me I couldn't do it. I wasn't prepared for that, but I think we shouldn't buy into that; we have to have the intestinal fortitude to take the idea and run with it."

Government Role
The government should play a more active role in providing information about the range of services potentially accessible, but not seen as being readily available.

Inclusivity
Finally, noting the absence of visible minority, Aboriginal and "poor" women in attendance, a number of women challenged the ministry to "...go to their table. This [forum] is a pretty intimidating place for a lot of them."

Suggestions

Closing the Wage Gap
> Implement pay equity.

Closing the Poverty Gap
> Provide better education on sexuality, birth control, life skills and parenting skills.
> Improve access to birth control information, contraceptives and abortion services.
> Improve access to training and education.
> Review support requirements for women in need, including abuse victims.
> Examine ways to better integrate and coordinate support benefits.
> Consider the special needs of women of colour and Aboriginal women.
> Implement universal minimum income tied to the rate of inflation.
> Increase northern shelter allowances.
> Provide more integrated and coordinated support programs.

Supporting Women Children and Families
> Increase access to high-quality, affordable, flexible child care.
> Explore ways to better integrate and coordinate support benefits.
> Review support requirements for women in need including abuse victims.
> Provide support for stay-at-home mothers.
> Implement income tax and pension reforms for stay-at-home caregivers.
> Encourage employers to provide on-site child care and subsidies.
> Implement income tax and pension reform for stay-at-home caregivers and senior women.

Increasing Women's Representation in Positions of Influence
> Facilitate networking, mentoring and information sharing.
> Be more inclusive.
> Develop channels to provide information about available services.
> Provide coordinated information on the full range of services and resources available to women.

Cranbrook Regional Forum, September 19, 2000

Cranbrook, population approximately 20,000, is a service centre for local area mining, lumbering and agricultural operations. The Kootenay Aboriginal Reserve is immediately north of the city. The average income for women is $17,000 compared to $30,908 for men.

(Source: 1996 Census, Statistics Canada)

Much of the discussion among the 53 women who attended this forum centred on the information and support needs of women entrepreneurs, since many women look to self-employment as an alternative to the low-paying, part-time jobs that are prevalent in the community. As one woman stated:

"We are a very resource-based community — traditionally male-oriented. Maybe that's why we have a lot of self-employed women in this room. There are not a lot of opportunities for interesting jobs for women here."

Other areas of discussion included the problem of persistent stereotyping, teenage pregnancy, isolation, the lack of high-end, full-time employment opportunities and education and training.

Emerging Issues

Entrepreneurship

Cranbrook women recognize the benefits self-employment offers, especially in small, economically depressed communities where the only choices may be low-paying minimum-wage jobs, welfare, or no job at all. Support and encouragement for women who are trying to make the transition into developing their own businesses was signaled as most important.

One suggested the creation of co-ops for self-employed people "to provide benefits, pensions etc."

Others recommended bigger tax breaks and incentives for women in small business, suggesting that women occupy the poorest of small enterprises.

During a discussion on pay equity, another suggested the special circumstances of small business need to be taken into consideration.

"Small business owners need standards that take into account the realities of the region. In depressed areas, salaries might be lower — that's all you can afford to pay."

Attitudes

Cranbrook women echoed issues expressed in the other forums. Women's work in the home, and often in the workplace, is simply not recognized or valued. And for women locked into low-end jobs and untenable living conditions, the impact can be doubly damaging and demoralizing. As one woman who was laid off a year ago stated:

"Self-esteem is a huge issue. We can't give it to our children if we don't have it ourselves."

Another suggested that equity values should be taught in the early grades, to foster healthier attitudes toward women.

Noting the high incidence of teenage pregnancies, even among girls in Grades 8 and 9, others recommended life-skills training and self-esteem programs.

"We need to educate young women so they don't get pregnant. If they become pregnant, then they don't get an education or get any work experience and then they get further behind. We must educate girls and women, or we won't see any change."

Recognizing the value of women's work, helping women to internalize their sense of self-worth, and providing concrete support for them to grow are essential steps, a number of women argued. As it is, women continue to bear the burden of antiquated and stereotypical views, according to a number who addressed the issue.

"We forget the value of raising small children. Women are abused and suffer the stigma of being on welfare in order to be home with children ...."

"As women, we need to be compassionate about the issues for our daughters .... It is women who work extra hours and women who are not valued .... The lack of valuing women is reflected in wages for women's traditional work."

Pay Equity

In principle, pay equity was endorsed by those who addressed the issue. However, some expressed the need to proceed with caution, pointing to the fact that some women, primarily small business women, could be affected negatively.

"Legislation needs to be done with common sense. If an owner of a small business is making less than the minimum wage herself, legislation should not come down hard on her."

While there was no consensus on the need for legislation, one woman strongly advised that pay equity legislation requires enforcement provisions to ensure employers are in compliance. Another suggested a complaint-based model won't work, particularly for women in smaller communities.

"Regarding pay equity, if a woman speaks up against a single employer, she is blacklisted. This is easily done in a small community. It should not be complaint-based. That's why nobody complains in a small community. Word will get out that you're a bad employee."

Another woman advised against "reinventing the wheel" and suggested the province look at what works best in other provinces where pay equity legislation has been implemented.

Isolation

Participants noted that women in small communities experience unique problems. Options are limited on many fronts, and the pressure not to challenge "the norm" is compelling. One after another, women spoke of why this is:

"In isolated areas, there are fewer choices and less power to do something about abuses."

"The problem with abortion services in rural communities is that doctors are afraid to do abortions — and for a very good reason."

Access to training and education is difficult and transportation costs make travel prohibitive, according to some participants.

Ageism

A number of older women spoke of their struggles to exist on limited incomes. Others who stayed at home to raise families are now entirely dependent on their husbands, and those who try to find work, often find obstacles instead.

"There are not a lot of jobs for older women. My mom was a caregiver for her older parents which took her out of the workforce — what jobs can she get now?"

A 63-year-old woman who lost her job five years ago, and as a result her family house, pinpointed the issue she says many older women face.

"There is no support for older women who have tried and worked hard all their life."

And in the words of a 49-year-old:

"Older women are invisible. I am dependent on my husband for pension and well-being when I get older. Women are not recognized for staying at home."

Education

Much of the discussion focused on the need to combat poverty, dependency, and stereotypical attitudes with education — starting at an early age. Participants suggested that getting out of the poverty trap begins with education. Specialized supports and programs recognizing the special needs of women need to be built into education and training. Building self-esteem should start at an early age. Participants saw early intervention as essential.

"At the school level, get males and females together to discuss how they view women. Alter male views of women at an earlier age to accept a variety of roles for women. Broaden their sense of the world...."

"Advocacy training for employment centres regarding the value of hiring women."

"We need to educate young women so they don't get pregnant."

Income Tax and Pension Reform, and the Minimum Wage

Cranbrook women expressed a range of views on how government policy can be better shaped to benefit working women and small business owners.

"Bigger tax breaks for small businesses — we know women occupy the poorest of small businesses so there need to be more incentives and breaks for them.

"Provide pensions for stay-at-home moms."

"Many women get paid minimum wage, working at Zellers, etc. But since it's a part-time work force, the employer does not need to pay benefits. This is a double whammy for women — they want to work more hours, but can't get them."

Caregiving

This emerged as a major issue for women in Cranbrook, especially from the perspective of women who have paid the price to stay at home and raise their children or look after aging relatives. The discussions focused as much on the need to recognize the value of women's unpaid contributions as they did on the need for more accessible and flexible child care. Numerous women reiterated this theme. They all called for support programs of one form or another in recognition of their work. One woman spoke of the price women pay when affordable and flexible child care is not available.

"Women doing part-time work, shift work, with no benefits and poor child care cannot do volunteer work that is required or move into positions of influence."

Another suggested innovative workplace initiatives to promote women-friendly workplaces.

"Women look for things other than wages. There is a need for a business advocacy service which would show employers the benefits of supporting families in the workplace."

And one woman called for tax breaks in recognition of the value of women's unpaid work.

"Raising children is the most important job, yet there are no tax benefits for staying at home and raising children."

Suggestions

Closing the Wage Gap

> Legislate pay equity coupled with strong enforcement.
> Phase in complaint procedures.
> Review policies of other provinces.
> Provide incentives for business.
> Small business start-ups.
> Develop co-ops for self-employed people.
> Encourage women to enter non-traditional jobs.

Closing the Poverty Gap

> Increase the minimum wage.
> Support job upgrading with loans and training.
> Maintain or increase funding to Bridging programs.
> Ensure abortion services are available in all regions.
> Reward good employers.
> Improve student loans.
> Address additional requirements for women in need, including visible minorities, Aboriginal women, and women with disabilities.
> Provide early education initiatives on equity values and self-esteem.
> Recognize the special needs of smaller, isolated communities.
> Enhance discrimination policies.
> Stop clawing back social assistance.
> Increase child care workers' salaries.
> Implement awareness and education programs on equity values.
> Enforce anti-discrimination legislation.

Supporting Women, Families and Children

> Increase access to high-quality, affordable, flexible child care.
> Implement income tax and pension reforms for caregivers.
> Provide family life education.
> Improve employer benefits to support working families.
> Improve maternity benefits for lower income people.
> Provide incentives for job sharing.

Surrey/South Fraser Regional Forum, September 26, 2000

Surrey is one of the fastest-growing cities in Canada, with a population of close to 340,000. The city is large and sprawling, and includes the communities of Cloverdale, Guildford, Langley, and White Rock, among others. There is a large multicultural population. The city is home to a growing number of small and medium-sized businesses and numerous industrial parks. The average annual income of women is $19,332 compared to $32,001 for men.

(Source: 1996 Census, Statistics Canada)

The Surrey South Fraser forum was a microcosm of the province at large. The 118 women who attended provided a range of perspectives reflecting the needs of women from different cultural and economic backgrounds. The discussions emphasized the needs of women living in poverty, and included talk about social assistance programs, education and training, the need for English as a second language programs, elder care, ageism and entrepreneurship.

Emerging Issues

Poverty

In Surrey South Fraser, stories abounded about the hardship women face when fleeing abusive relationships, struggling with and failing to achieve a decent living on minimum wage jobs, and trying to cope on welfare. One woman recounted:

"I used to be independent and make a good living. Then I married an abusive husband. I left and lost everything."

Another stated simply:

"It's hard to see children going to bed hungry."

Incentives were called for to help people get "off the system" and eliminate the need to work two or three part-time jobs to make ends meet. The disparity between full-time workers and those holding part-time jobs was highlighted and the long-reaching impact of poverty was articulated.

"The cycle of poverty and abuse continues because children can't afford education and can't get jobs."

Increased financial assistance, better child care, transportation allowances and greater access to educational upgrading and training were all viewed as necessary to bridge the gap for women in poverty.

"I had to fight to get into school — I fell through the cracks but I don't qualify for a student loan .... I was told by welfare I should stay at home until my child is seven, but by then I will have lost all my self-esteem."

Pay Equity

Participants recognized that disparities in pay are substantial and widespread, and cited numerous examples.

"The minimum wage went up by 45 cents but doctors got $45,000!"

"What is a job worth? As a home support worker I make $14 while a janitor in a school makes $19. That seems screwed up. Is cleaning a toilet worth more than getting granny's bath?"

"There is a 72% difference for both my son and my daughter with grade 12 getting an entry level job. My son gets $12 more an hour… we need equality across the board not just pay equity."

Pay equity legislation was strongly endorsed:

"Success will be in actions — pay equity needs to be legislated — that's a no-brainer."

But legislation alone is not enough, in the view of some participants who spoke to the issue. It must be coupled with strong enforcement and monitoring:

"Women are silenced for fear of losing their job or being labeled as a troublemaker. There should be a way to monitor companies to see that they pay what they should."

Entrepreneurship

Starting a business was viewed as an attractive avenue for many women who need to combine child care with work, or to make the transition from low-paying jobs.

"I want to start my own business but I don't feel that I can do that. I was told to take a course but I don't need a course. As an entrepreneur you need a little bit of coaching… and you need child care. Once someone has motivation you can do anything but you just need a little bit of support and funding."

But the women called for supports to help make the transitions. One woman spoke of the difficulties inherent in the existing system.

"Now I'm on Income Assistance and would like to start a small business slowly while taking care of my children. I would like to build some stock and build up the business but that's not allowed on IA. You've got one year to sink or swim."

Ageism

"I am unemployed, divorced and with enormous skills but I can't get a job."

The plight of the "invisible poor," women in the 40–65 age bracket, was repeatedly mentioned as an overlooked but significant group. Taking strong measures to end age discrimination was emphasized:

"I am 56 years old, divorced and am now back in the work force at my age. I go for interviews, have the qualifications, but age is against me getting a job."

"Older women in low-paying non-union jobs are first to be let go when government or private companies are downsizing. It feels like discrimination but it's hard to prove."

Aboriginal Funding

Discussion here centred around the need to increase funding and involve Métis women in the design of programs intended to benefit them:

"The average Métis woman has a low income, and low education is an issue. They need their own programs developed by them, for them. Statistics show that Métis women are very much discriminated against — even more so than immigrant women .... They don't get their fair share of money allocated to violence issues."

Education and Training

In Surrey South Fraser, a range of issues was raised, beginning with the need to incorporate equality values in early education:

"Address issues across gender and cross-culturally — educate young men and women from an early age on values of equality."

"We need a strong focus on values of equality."

Others spoke of the need for retraining programs that would assist in upgrading from minimum wage jobs and a call was made for cost sharing between the government and private sector to support women to enter non-traditional areas of work. Problems with literacy need to be addressed:

"Women face barriers to accessing education. Often they have low literacy skills so it is tough to get the education they need."

Inclusivity

A number of participants noted that immigrant women and women of colour who have been in the country for a number of years have special needs.

"The issue is access. Immigrant and visible minority women have different attitudes about how they value work and how they value pay .... Many women who came to Canada years ago were squeezed out and are now trying to re-enter the job market. How can we help them?"

Income Tax and Pension Reform

"Cut income taxes and pay stay-at-home mothers for what they do."

Surrey South Fraser women underlined the importance of changing taxation policy to address the needs of parents who make the choice to stay at home to raise their children:

"I am 33 and a stay-at-home mom with two children. I can barely afford to stay at home even though I work from home as well."

Pension adjustments were also called for:

"Both my husband and I work part time to be able to raise our kids — there is no recognition of that. They should increase RRSP limits to be able to provide better retirement if you do not have a pension."

"I am retired and have been divorced .... My pension is small. I did lots of volunteer work but there is no acknowledgement of that in pensions."

Suggestions

Closing the Wage Gap

> Legislate pay equity.
> Implement strong enforcement and monitoring mechanisms.
> Ensure policy is applied equally throughout regions.
> Provide tax incentives for small business.
> Provide tax breaks, incentives and pension improvements for small business start-ups.
> Encourage women to enter non-traditional jobs.
> Support part-time entrepreneurs.

Closing the Poverty Gap

> Increase financial support for education and training.
> Improve access to safe, affordable housing, transportation and child care.
> Develop work force re-entry programs for immigrant women.
> Fill in the "missing links" and rationalize the variety of income support programs.
> Address discrimination, literacy and abuse issues for Métis women.
> Facilitate women's efforts to upgrade from low-paying work.
> Provide free university and college education.
> Increase social assistance rates.
> Review existing programs to ensure needs are met.
> Set up crisis line resources.
> Provide comprehensive support for women trying to leave abusive environments.
> Provide education on life skills and self-esteem.
> Implement education programs on equity values.
> Enforce anti-discrimination laws.

Supporting Women, Families and Children

> Provide income tax and pension reforms for caregivers.
> Improve accessibility of high-quality, affordable, flexible and culturally sensitive child care.
> Enhance supports for home care.

Increasing Women's Representation in Positions of Influence

> Translate consultation into action.
> Organize networking opportunities for women to develop solutions.

Women's Economic Equality Conference — Beyond the Gap, October 13–14, 2000

Background
Following the regional forums, the Minister of Women's Equality and the Premier hosted **Women's Economic Equality Conference — Beyond the Gap**, in Vancouver, October 13–14, 2000.

Two hundred and ten women came from across the province to attend B.C.'s first ever women's economic equality conference.

Delegates represented:
women-serving and community organizations — Aboriginal and Métis women, women of colour, immigrant and refugee communities — organizations for women with disabilities — labour — social justice and poverty action groups — local government — business — government — education. A number of women attended simply as individuals.

While there was representation from all of these sectors, the largest contingency came from women-serving and community organizations.

The conference agenda, to some degree, reflected the four themes outlined in the Discussion Paper and explored at the regional forums — Closing the Wage Gap, Closing the Poverty Gap, Supporting Women, Children and Families, and Increasing Women's Representation in Positions of Influence. However, the agenda was designed to shift emphasis from exploration and discussion to creating partnerships for the advancement of a women's economic agenda.

Three plenary sessions featured keynote speakers and offered an opportunity to discuss and debate women's economic equality from a broader perspective. The conference's eight workshops were designed to encourage information sharing on specific issues, best practices, and new ideas. They provided a forum for smaller group discussions and relationship building.

Plenary Sessions:

1) Women's Economic Equality: The Case for Moving Forward with keynote speaker Judy Rebick.

2) Supporting Change: The Emerging Roles for Government — a panel discussion moderated by Dr. Linda Duxbury.

3) Leadership and Partnership: Our Collective Vision for the Future — a panel discussion with former Minister of Women's Equality, Joan Smallwood and representatives from different organizations.

Workshops:
These focused on employment-related topics and workplace practices. They included:

Pay Equity: The Debate

Women-Friendly and Family-Friendly Workplaces: Everyone Benefits

New Frontiers: Women in Historically Non-Traditional Sectors

Supporting Women's Advancement in the Workplace

Beyond Numbers: Women, Leadership and the Economy

The New Workplace: Payoffs of Diversity

Moving Beyond Stereotypes and, Preventing Harassment

A ninth workshop, **Strategies and Partnerships to Address Women's Poverty**, was organized in response

to concerns that the focus on advancing employment opportunities, and workplace and wage issues, ignores the reality of thousands of B.C. women caught in the web of poverty and dependency.

Conference Feedback

For the purpose of consistency, the conference proceedings are summarized in the same manner as the feedback from the discussion paper — ***Women's Economic Security and Pay Equity*** — and the regional forums. The key issues are identified and elaborated. The ideas and recommendations are categorized according to the four themes mentioned previously.

Using workshop and flip chart notes, and the transcriptions and observations of ministry staff and conference organizers, the predominant issues arising from the proceedings are identified as follows.

Emerging Issues

Women Working Together — Mentoring, Networking, Sharing Information

"Something magical happened here. I felt really validated. It was empowering and exciting."

Not surprisingly, since the conference was designed to foster relationship building and the creation of partnerships, this issue predominated throughout the proceedings. Repeatedly, women voiced the need to work together to effect change and advance the equality agenda. In both plenaries and workshops, delegates highlighted the need for activities that would continue to connect women.

No matter what their issue or particular area of concern, participants were virtually unanimous regarding the need for new partnerships and mentoring programs to move the equality agenda forward. Throughout the weekend a number of innovative examples were highlighted including:

> the Women In Business mentorship model developed by Darlene Gunter
> the innovative, community-based mentorship work of Jannit Rabinovitch
> the women in non-traditional sectors (trades, technology and science) mentorship programs developed by Anne St. Eloi and Tamara Pongracz at BCIT
> the highly successful partnership and mentorship model of SWIFT–IBM–UBC, spearheaded by Dr. Maria Clawe and coordinated by Vania Chan
> the groundbreaking mentorship work of the Society for Canadian Women in Science and Technology
> the self-employment/small business mentorship by All Nations Trust Company in Kamloops, and other Aboriginal business development programs.

Suggesting that education and training are essential to further the equality agenda, a wealth of ideas emerged on ways to support the development of partnerships to make opportunities and resources more accessible to women.

Among the suggestions:

> a province-wide newsletter with input from communities and organizations across the province
> an online database of resources
> an interactive women's Web site to post upcoming events
> "small table" or "circle" discussions among women and youth from diverse backgrounds
> ongoing opportunities for women to meet, discuss, and influence decisions.

Participants called on the ministry to facilitate this networking, financially support some of these initiatives, and lobby other ministries for support. The comments of several women at the closing plenary session articulate the depth of belief in the need for collective action.

"I was really excited by much of the discussion that's taken place over the past few days. That collectively we understand... we have to work together to improve the overall condition of women. That issues of employment equity, and ending the discrimination in terms of areas of work between men and women, that those are things that we all understand that we have to take on. We can expect some help from government but without our work together, that is not going to change."

"We came to the conclusion that unions need to work more jointly with Women's Centres... On behalf of CUPE, I commit to do that."

And post-conference feedback echoed this theme:

"The power in our voices is strong. We need lots of voices — and need to include the voices of the people who have experienced the issues."

"I came away with a greater awareness of what women can do for each other, and with each other."

Inclusivity

While the conference generated renewed enthusiasm for collective action among women, participants challenged the ministry about the limited participation of women of colour in leadership roles at the conference. They also suggested that the weekend's agenda did not adequately address the needs of the most marginalized women. Participants said we should listen to the unheard voices.

"I think it is our conceit that there are women who cannot speak for themselves. I know that if we go to them and listen, and when appropriate, pay for their time and energy, they are very capable of speaking for themselves.... So I think that it would be a really good learning curve for everyone to remember that there are different ways to listen to people and it's really important to continue to listen to people who might be silent."

Participants called on the ministry to share decision-making and planning power for future conferences with visible minority women. They also urged the ministry to continue with its plan to expand the public consultation process and hold equity forums specifically for Aboriginal women, women with disabilities, and visible minority women.

Women leaders in unions and social justice organizations were challenged to address racism, class discrimination and elitism within their organizations. The ministry was asked to take a stronger advocacy role within government to ensure the needs of the most marginalized people of the province are included on the government's agenda.

Workplace Discrimination

"When addressing barriers to women's economic equality, it's foolhardy to deal with one or two gaps at the exclusion of others...." — Post-conference participant comment.

The issue of workplace discrimination limiting the ability of women to ***access*** the workplace, ***remain*** in the workplace or ***advance*** in the workplace was a recurring topic of discussion in a number of workshops.

There was discussion on the circumstances of women coming to Canada under the Live-In Caregivers Program. Much of the focus was on their limited legal rights to combat discrimination and abuse, as well as the inability of many women to advance out of the domestic worker role.

Participants also noted the continuing problem of racial discrimination in unions, the limited inclusion of Aboriginal women in developing workplace equity strategies, and the lack of involvement of women with disabilities in government planning processes and in the workplace generally.

The issue of workplace harassment was also highlighted. Women spoke of the heavy emotional and financial toll exacted by harassment.

In particular, participants urged the government and employers to combat harassment targeted at visible minority women and women with disabilities.

A number of women suggested the Women's Workplace Equity Office (now renamed the Centre for Workplace Excellence) could initiate activity in this area.

Participants suggested the ministry develop a stronger liaison with the Human Rights Commission and implement strategies and educational programs to address harassment issues.

They also recommended the government use the judicial system to more effectively address sexual harassment in the workplace.

Women-Friendly, Family-Friendly Workplaces

"Give men and women the option of working together — if men don't understand our issues, they'll never walk beside us." — Post-conference participant comment.

The need to develop women-friendly, family-friendly workplaces to help women balance their work with the other parts of their life was a topic of discussion in a number of workshops other than the one devoted to this topic.

Throughout the weekend, much of the exchange focused on the actual elements necessary to implement family-friendly policies and practices.

Participants generally agreed that legislation is required to support policies such as extended parental leave, and accessible and affordable child care. They suggested without these provisions, women's access to opportunities and advancement are greatly curtailed. They also noted that women in the lowest-paying and part-time jobs have the least opportunity to access family-friendly programs. These needs have to be formally examined.

A number of women called on unions to include family-friendly programs in the collective bargaining process.

The ministry was called on to be a more vocal advocate for women within government and outside. Participants suggested government work closely with employers, unions and promoters of family-friendly workplaces to enhance understanding and appreciation of the benefits such practices offer. A number of women suggested the Centre for Workplace Excellence could take an active role in this area.

The ministry was also encouraged to participate in programs such as the "Collaboration on Work Life" and other initiatives aimed at promoting more progressive workplace practices.

Pay Equity

Overall, conference participants endorsed pay equity legislation. In a number of workshops and plenaries, they discussed ways women can work together to pressure the government to enact it. At the same time, there was agreement that pay equity legislation is only one piece of the puzzle. Participants spoke of the need for more effective employment equity policies and programs to improve access to employment and advancement for visible minority women, Aboriginal women, and women with disabilities.

Emphasis was placed on the need for implementation strategies and education programs for employers. The ministry was also advised to consult with and involve the private sector and other employers early on in the legislative process.

Concerns were raised that sectors where women are over-represented in the workforce, such as the non-profit sector and food services industry, are the sectors most in need of pay equity. Yet these groups are the least unionized and least empowered to lobby for the legislation.

The government was challenged by a number of participants who complained about a double standard. On the one hand, they suggested, government is promoting pay equity. On the other, government limits wages for women by limiting funding to the non-profit sector.

Pay equity discussions also prompted debate about the impact of minimum wage increases. It was observed that such increases often result in women getting fewer hours of work so that the overall impact of the increases is neutral — or even detrimental.

Poverty

"I think that the women's movement has to start to take a real interest in what is happening for impoverished women in our province — the young people who are living on the street, the single parents who are out there, and the older women who are out there and don't have the training and there's no lifeline for them at all. That is very frightening. For most of us we've got the jobs and we are going to be okay, but it's a fear to us. If the province would look after them, then I think that would be a huge thing to come out of this."
— Closing Plenary comment.

The particular barriers facing women in poverty and the devastating dynamics of poverty in women's lives emerged as an important issue for participants.

Appreciating that the original intent of the conference was to focus on employment and workplace issues, participants stressed the linkages between poverty and employment, noting: women who aren't employed are poor, many

women who are employed full time are poor, and, women who are marginally employed are poor.

The focus of the discussions, both inside the workshop on poverty and outside it, concentrated on a number of key items: the need to maintain and increase funding of Bridging programs; the need for affordable housing, especially for women and children on social assistance; and the need to review social assistance benefits, which many view as inadequate.

Participants pointed to further areas for review: the connection between violence against women and poverty, marginalization of women, workplace abuse, and the link between English language skills and poverty.

Women urged the ministry to take a leadership role within government and to form a multi-ministry strategy to address women's poverty.

A number of women also urged the ministry to assist First Nations women's organizations, and organizations serving women with disabilities, and lesbian/transgender women.

Women's Leadership

"As one of the younger women in this room, I really appreciate being included and I would like to see more women coming to this conference in the future ... I see in this room a lot of people who I look up to as role models and I really appreciate being in the room with them ..."
— Closing Plenary comment.

Three workshops focused specifically on women as leaders in our society, and on the challenges faced by women in achieving and maintaining leadership roles. These topics emerged as issues for discussion in almost every other workshop as well.

Participants suggested the ministry take a more assertive leadership role within government to ensure issues related to women's economic equality are included on the political agenda.

There was also considerable discussion about the need for the women's movement itself to further explore and understand the dynamics of women in leadership. Women encouraged each other, as members of the women's movement, to address the record of including young women in leadership roles in their respective organizations.

They also recommended more opportunities for women leaders from all sectors, all income levels, and all backgrounds, to meet and develop strategies to address the leadership issue.

Suggestions

Closing the Wage Gap

> Legislate pay equity.
> Consult with private sector and other organizations throughout the legislative process.
> Provide education to employers and the public to increase understanding of pay equity.
> Address government funding of social service agencies to enable pay equity without disruption of service delivery capability.
> Develop strategies in conjunction with the Human Rights Commission and the judiciary to combat workplace harassment and sexual harassment.

Closing the Poverty Gap

> Improve access to training and education.
> Review social assistance and other support requirements of women, particularly the needs of women with children, immigrant women and women of colour.
> Maintain Bridging programs and increase funding to them.
> Take leadership role within government to address women's poverty.
> Provide support for building the capacity of organizations serving Aboriginal, visible minority women and women with disabilities.
> Examine impact of the Live-In Caregivers program.
> Increase ESL (English as a Second Language) training.
> Explore correlation of English language capabilities and poverty.
> Implement formal workplace diversity initiatives and equity programs.
> Further explore connections between violence and women's economic equality.
> Address impact of minimum wage increases on women, particularly part-time workers.
> Implement multi-ministry review of workplace needs of low-income women.

Supporting Women, Children and Families

> Increase access to affordable, flexible, culturally sensitive child care.
> Increase availability of affordable housing.
> Facilitate discussion, action and promotion of women-friendly, family-friendly workplace practices.
> Legislate extended parental leave.

Increasing Women's Representation in Positions of Influence

> Provide opportunities, venues for further discussions and strategy development for women from all backgrounds, all sectors and all income levels.
> Facilitate development of partnerships and mentorship programs.
> Create ways for women from diverse backgrounds and experiences to advise and influence the work of the ministry.
> Develop an Internet-based directory of all women-serving organizations and agencies, and consider other mechanisms for interactive information exchange.
> Implement community, regional and provincial round tables for continued input and inclusion of women from all backgrounds.
> Provide opportunities to celebrate and promote the achievements of women from all backgrounds.
> Facilitate discussions on understanding women and leadership with employers, women-serving organizations and other groups.
> Become a more assertive advocate of women's equality within government.
> Provide ongoing and regular updates on advances being made with the government's equity agenda.
> Encourage others to take leadership roles — it's not all up to government.
> Create a Women's Advisory Council attached to the ministry — at regional and provincial levels.

The Voices for Equity – Equity Forum Feedback

In B.C., women and girls make up 50.3 per cent of the population. Approximately four per cent of the population is Aboriginal, 18 per cent are visible minority women and 3.5 per cent have a disability. Many of these women face additional barriers to employment, economic security and equality because of their backgrounds.

The ministry held five equity forums to hear from the women who face unique challenges and to invite views on ways to be more responsive to their specific needs.

The following are reports from each of these consultations. They are not verbatim transcripts of the proceedings, which were not taped. Rather, they are intended to reflect the spirit and substance of the discussions.

It should be noted that for the sake of brevity, this report uses the word "Aboriginal" inclusively, to describe all people of Aboriginal ancestry, including non-status Aboriginal and Métis people.

The forum highlighted the historic and systemic oppression that Aboriginal women face. The forty-five women who attended suggested that Métis and Aboriginal women feel marginalized and powerless. They spoke of the need to have a voice to influence government and to increase their power within their communities.

Emerging Issues

Marginalization

Aboriginal women feel they have minimal influence on decision-making or policy-making. One woman used the term "triple oppression" to describe the barriers Aboriginal women face in a province where business and government are typically dominated by white men, and even Aboriginal organizations are patriarchal, with men holding most of the power on band councils.

Several women noted their lack of influence in government. In the words of one:

"You're not listening to us. Why don't you hire First Nations women?"

Another woman said government should do more.

"... do more to give Aboriginal people a priority in the government work force [with] good points of entry and good career paths at different levels."

A number of women raised the idea of forming an advisory group to give Aboriginal women a voice in government. Several others spoke of the need to have more power in their communities, suggesting that currently there is no infrastructure anywhere for Aboriginal women to establish their authority to put issues on the table. One woman asked:

"How can we have influence at the community level? There's no infrastructure to help us make change."

Historic and Systemic Oppression

Another key issue of the forum was the lasting legacy of the *Indian Act*, which for generations restricted the rights of Aboriginal people in Canada.

One woman described the gender discrimination inherent in the Act and how, for example, in the 1940s, only boys were funded to continue their education beyond elementary school. Another woman noted that, for many years, Aboriginal women were stripped of their status and their right to benefits if they married non-Aboriginal men.

Others spoke of the way the *Indian Act* helped to foster a culture of reliance on public programs. One woman said, "Our people have a deep-rooted dependency on government funding sources" and noted that this is often a barrier to economic security. Another remarked:

"Women have been alienated from the economy. Now we just compete for little pots of money."

A third woman said there's a sense of "helplessness and dependency around income security programs and services," while another observed that "make work" programs through the years had only encouraged "the co-dependence of natives."

One woman suggested the need "to respect tribal ways" and return to more traditional Aboriginal economic structures, built around concepts like bartering and sharing. Others stressed the need for additional support for Métis and Aboriginal women to start their own businesses.

Unique Needs of Métis Women

Several women emphasized that Aboriginal women are not homogeneous groups. As one woman stated:

"The government should learn about non-status and Métis women — not just those on reserves."

Another spoke of the need to address "the on- and off-reserve dichotomy," adding, "We need to look at internalized oppression."

A third woman pointed out:

"Métis [people] have never lived on-reserve. They have no land base or community. [Government policies] should be adjusted to fit groups like the Métis, not just those on-reserve."

It was also noted that the Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs "is devoted only to treaty making and not gender issues, and only to status people."

Isolation

Although this was an urban forum, women from rural communities also attended and pointed out that many Aboriginal and Métis women are geographically isolated, especially in the North, and often have difficulty accessing services to help them achieve economic security. One woman noted that northern B.C. is a large area with one of the highest rates of violence against women, especially Aboriginal women, yet most of the services are in the Lower Mainland. Another noted:

"There are no adequate resources in northern communities for women and children, especially those suffering from violence."

Others observed that Aboriginal women can be isolated in urban centres too — not so much from services as from their families, communities and cultures, particularly around issues of violence.

For example, one woman talked about the effort she makes to contact women from her northern band whenever she visits Vancouver:

"Often they are homeless women on the street suffering from exploitation and addictions."

Several women talked about the need to "bridge the gap" and build stronger links between rural bands and urban Aboriginal women. There was also discussion around the needs of women who, for various reasons, have not entered the workforce.

"Women staying at home ... are isolated. They need [resources] to help them take that first step."

The Need for Culturally Sensitive Services

Participants generally agreed on the need for more and more appropriate supports to help them achieve economic security — from training and employment to child care programs, to supporting families involved in the child welfare system. They also agreed that in order to be effective, these services should be culturally sensitive in all aspects of their design and delivery.

Many women talked about the need for holistic services that take into account every aspect of a person's life, in keeping with Aboriginal values. One woman suggested the holistic approach is what Aboriginal women want and need: "one building where they can find everything."

Several women suggested that the ministry fund a network of Aboriginal Women's Centres. Others suggested a central resource guide for Aboriginal women in B.C.

The concept of holistic service was also discussed in the context of child welfare. Instead of apprehending children, one woman said, the Ministry for Children and Families "should support the whole family."

Another woman noted:

"When women go for [addiction] treatment their children are put into care, and when [they] get out of treatment, it's back into the same situation without any supports."

In these cases, participants said, government services do little to help women improve their lives.

There was also much discussion around the importance of community. Several women pointed out that supporting women also means supporting their partners and families. Said one women:

"I want to focus on men, women and their children. How else can you heal a community?"

Other women observed that non-Aboriginal people "don't understand what community means to us and don't understand Aboriginal culture." They agreed that services should be designed and delivered by Aboriginal people rather than by an "alien culture."

For example, one woman spoke about youth in her community who needed help but wouldn't use the programs available:

"Our people won't go to non-Aboriginal service providers."

Another suggested the government should hire Aboriginal people to serve groups with significant numbers of Aboriginals. And another said:

"We need autonomy and self-respect. The strength of our women needs renewal."

Federal-Provincial Jurisdictional Overlap

Women at the forum expressed concerns that the jurisdictional overlap between the federal and provincial governments can create barriers unique to Aboriginal women. Some of the areas identified include ongoing implications arising from inequities in the *Indian Act*, special recognition under the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, and

differences in entitlements to Aboriginal women living off-reserve.

Many women felt the mandate of the ministry should include the ability to advocate for Aboriginal women's equality-seeking needs with provincial, federal and Aboriginal governments.

Suggestions

Closing the Wage Gap

> Target more funding to support Aboriginal and Métis women who want to start or expand their own businesses.

Closing the Poverty Gap

> Increase wages for front-line workers in fields traditionally dominated by women, such as child care.
> Fund Aboriginal Women's Centres with one-stop access to training, employment, child care and other supports.
> Create more opportunities for Aboriginal and Métis women to enter, and build career paths within, the provincial government.
> Implement and enforce employment equity provisions for Métis and Aboriginal women in government.
> Encourage greater awareness of, and sensitivity to, the diversity of needs within Aboriginal and Métis communities.
> Increase access to flexible, affordable, high-quality and culturally sensitive child care.
> Involve Aboriginal and Métis women in developing the programs and policies that affect them.
> Provide longer-term supports for women who seek treatment for addiction.
> Explore ways of better supporting Aboriginal women making the transition to and from reserves.
> Continue dialogue with federal government on issues pertinent to Aboriginal women.

Increasing Women's Representation in Positions of Influence

> Support Aboriginal and Métis women in identifying opportunities to increase their influence and develop their skills as community leaders.
> Establish an advisory group to give Métis and Aboriginal women a voice in public policy-making. (Note: This is a recommendation that would apply in all categories.)

Forum for Lesbians, January 18, 2001

It should be noted that participants came from across the province and represented a broad range of age groups, professional backgrounds and personal histories. Many identified themselves as lesbian, while others identified themselves as gay, queer, bisexual, dyke or transgendered. Some used other language to describe their sexual identities, and some used no identifiers at all.

For the sake of brevity, this report uses generic terms such as "women," "lesbians," and "participants." This is in no way intended to disrespect individuals' choices about identifying themselves. As the facilitator stated at the forum's outset: "For today, I would like us to recognize the word lesbian as inclusive."

Among the 36 women who attended the forum, the discussion centred on the social and economic pressures to be "invisible" and conform to heterosexual roles and stereotypes. Participants also focused on issues of discrimination and workplace harassment.

Emerging Issues

Visibility

A number of women talked about the efforts they had made to hide or disguise their sexual identity and/or gender identity in order to achieve economic security — and the emotional price they paid.

One person who said she was financially secure, likened it to "walking a tightrope." She explained why.

"I got to where I am today by basically being 'drag' [as a feminine woman] every day of my life."

Another said that her ability to "pass" as a heterosexual woman helped her career, while a third woman said lesbians would face less discrimination if they were less overt about their sexuality.

Others noted that "coming out," or choosing to be visible as lesbians, also had a cost, including significant impact on their health and economic security. One told the group about her emotional trauma.

"I've spent six years in therapy. It's the hardest work I've ever done. I wonder how much more I could have achieved if I'd been able to put that energy into a job."

Several women pointed out the particular invisibility of lesbians, and the gay community generally, in remote and rural areas.

According to a woman from Prince George, "statistics erase lesbians, especially lesbians living in the North." As a single mother living in the Fraser Valley commented:

"My experience is like a throwback to 15 or 20 years ago."

Another woman said:

"There is no queer anything in the Okanagan."

Many women stressed the importance of government generally, and the Ministry of Women's Equality specifically, in showing leadership in supporting lesbians to be more visible in everyday society, adding that heterosexual men and

women also need to have the courage to speak up about gay rights and issues.

Some women do not fit the stereotypes of "femininity," and receive negative attention because of their high visibility. As one participant put it:

"I'm really a drag king. It's hard to see the stares. I go to a washroom and older women say I'm in the wrong washroom. I say 'No I'm not. I'm a girl."

Another concluded that the key to reducing discrimination is visibility — first and last.

"We need to make it so people can say [the word lesbian] and be in a room with it without feeling terrified."

For some, the need to be invisible has heavy consequences:

"Invisibility is tied to self-esteem. We are in a high risk business being out .... I want to be visible and I want to be supported to be visible."

Intersecting Issues

Another key theme was the complex intersection of issues in lesbians' lives. For example, women pointed out that a lesbian who is also a single mother is doubly disadvantaged and faces additional barriers to economic security.

Some of the women identified as many as four or five layers of issues in their lives, including challenges related to poverty, race, age, ability and geography.

As one woman said:

"Poverty, violence and racism at work are my reasons for being here."

Another added:

"I'm concerned about ... lesbian seniors. I'm also concerned that, being from the North, my experience is being left out."

Concern was voiced for the needs of "poor dykes" who also have disabilities, and it was noted that different cultures respond to issues around sexuality differently.

"It's difficult to manage the word 'lesbian' in some Aboriginal settings. There is a significant threat of being ostracized from our communities."

Education

Several women said that public education, especially for young children, could increase the visibility of lesbians and reduce discrimination.

"Children shape communities. Awareness and education need to start at the elementary level."

Others agreed that the idea was sound, but one added:

"Every time someone tries to start, they shut them down and take the books off the shelf."

One woman spoke about the impact of discrimination.

"You have to struggle and fight even in your own home. I raised my daughters to be aware and open-minded, but they wouldn't come to my ceremony with my partner."

Many participants felt there is not enough awareness in schools about gays and lesbians and, "too much tolerance of negativity." A number of women remarked that government should play a more proactive role in education, and one described her vision "to change the world so people can be whoever they are."

Employment Barriers

Many participants identified discrimination and workplace harassment as major barriers to economic security, beginning with rejection at interviews simply on the basis of appearance.

"It's hard to get a job when you don't look like a girl."

Several women remarked that lesbians who are also Aboriginal, or women of colour, or have a disability, face additional barriers in the struggle to achieve economic security.

A number of women who had worked in the trades said they found it extremely difficult to work in what they described as a "macho male" environment.

"What you have to go through is just ridiculous. You're constantly being watched and there's a lot of tolerance of negativity — sexism, racism, and homophobia. I got worn out and left."

"You do not feel emotionally or physically safe."

One woman, whose experience in the trades was more positive, said she had eventually gained the respect of her colleagues. However, she also said she had to fight back.

"It's difficult if you see men as a mass and think you have to change their attitudes all at once. I do it one at a time and earn their respect."

Several said that, in spite of legislation and policy, trades were not really open to women. In the words of one woman:

"They open the door to trades and then throw us into a pool of sharks."

The women called on government to do more to make the trades and workplaces more welcoming for women generally, and for lesbians specifically.

"It's not right that individual women have to take on the job of educating one jerk at a time."

Some women noted that lesbians face discrimination and harassment from both men and women. One told the story of a female co-worker who taunted her about the fact she, as a lesbian, was ineligible for marriage-related employment

benefits, and another talked about feeling "invalidated" and "disrespected" as "one out of two dykes in a women's organization with 35 employees."

"We counseled survivors of sexual abuse ... and the first response of my supervisors was, 'What if the lesbians sexually harass our clients?'"

One woman cautioned that lesbians also need to be aware of their own individual biases.

Economic Security

Many women questioned the whole concept of economic security. Some felt it was simply not an achievable objective — for them, and for women generally.

One woman spoke of her experience:

"I've worked hard all my life and I still don't have economic security."

Those who felt they were economically secure characterized themselves as "extremely fortunate."

A number of women talked about the fact that much of feminist activism is performed by lesbians who are career activists.

"So much of the social activist work that many of us do has no security attached to it."

They also noted that women's advocacy and volunteer skills are rarely recognized, and that women who work in these fields have no pensions.

Poverty

Participants stressed the importance of economic security for those for whom employment is not a realistic option, for health or other reasons. Several women were critical of BC Benefits rates which they described as insufficient to meet basic needs, and destructive to their self-esteem. One woman described the level of desperation to which she had been driven by poverty. She stole a chocolate bar because she was hungry, and now she has a criminal record.

Several participants felt that issues such as pay equity were not very meaningful for women on Income Assistance and said that the ministry needs to be more proactive in addressing the plight of poor women.

"[Government] needs to give people more money, not more programs. Money matters. It improves the quality of life."

Aging

Many women expressed considerable anxiety about the lack of economic security for lesbians as they age. It was noted that many older lesbians "have come through the trenches doing community activist work that has no pension benefits."

One participant stressed the correlation between income and health, pointing out its heightened importance for older women. Too often, she said, people think concerns about economic security disappear at age 65 when, in fact, they often intensify. The women agreed that true economic security means having adequate, life-long support.

Another concern expressed was the lack of services targeted specifically to meeting the needs of aging lesbians. Participants called on the government and the ministry to encourage and support funding for health services, and to ensure that existing services were gay-friendly.

Youth

While some of the older women were concerned about pensions, many of the younger women talked about struggling with the burden of student loans, and struggling to make their way in a world that often seems hostile or indifferent. One young woman expressed the frustration:

"In school it's an insult to say 'Oh, that's so gay!' Gay is me."

Another summed up the level of despair felt by many youth, pointing out:

"Aboriginal lesbian and gay youth have the highest suicide rate."

Others spoke of the need for young lesbians to have more support at an earlier age, and talked about how difficult it was to grow up in a traditional working class family.

"We need self-esteem-building tools and visibility projects ... and anti-bullying projects focusing on queer youth. For me, being younger and knowing someone who looked like me would let me know I had options."

"They treated me like a boy. I grew up thinking I'm a boy. I had a stable family. I was okay as far as food goes, but nobody checked my head."

Another woman said she was disappointed there weren't more youth at the forum. She described the event as "non-youth-friendly. The package of information is not accessible." She added that government should make more of an effort to reach out to youth in general and gay youth specifically.

Suggestions

Closing the Poverty Gap

> Prioritize issues of economic security.
> Raise Income Assistance rates.
> Raise the minimum wage.
> Fund outreach programs to support lesbian seniors and youth.
> Increase accountability in meeting diverse needs of women, and report on actions to increase women's economic security.
> Value contributions of community organizers and activists — provide honorariums to women involved in forums and government advisory groups.
> Increase counselling services for those "coming out."
> Develop school programs to address homophobia.
> Make government contracts with women's organizations contingent on commitments to do anti-homophobia training and consciousness raising against racism, sexism, and prejudices against persons with disabilities.

Supporting Women, Children and Families

> Lobby federal government to remove barriers in the *Employment Insurance Act*.

Increasing Women's Representation in Positions of Influence

> Implement public relations work with media to promote visibility and the legitimacy of lesbians as equal citizens.
> Fund lesbian organizations to help develop and strengthen community support networks.

Forum for Women of Colour, January 25, 2001

Forty-two women met to discuss the additional barriers to economic equality facing women of colour. Some of the women were invited as representatives of organizations and others were invited as individuals. The intent was to be inclusive of the diversity of women of colour in British Columbia. Women came from across the province, and represented a wide range of ages, interests and cultures. They included immigrant, refugee, Canadian-born, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered women of colour, women of colour with disabilities and women of mixed background — and each brought a unique perspective.

Generally, women said that a lack of respect for their cultural needs prevented them from achieving economic security. There was an emphasis throughout on the need for culturally sensitive workplaces, child care, business resources and training, and mentoring programs.

Emerging Issues

Cultural Sensitivity

This was the overarching theme of the forum. There was discussion about racism and its impact on women of colour, including lack of sensitivity, and lack of respect for who they are. Many women cited this as the key factor preventing them from achieving economic security.

Some talked about feeling exploited and many said that women of colour tend to get stuck in jobs with poor wages and benefits.

"We need to acknowledge systemic racism before we can open up opportunities for women of colour [and] stop being segregated."

"Discrimination reinforces barriers to economic equality, privilege and access [to services] at all levels."

Members of one discussion group talked about what racism meant to them and how it affected their lives. One woman said that because she has a German-sounding name and no accent, she's often treated differently on the phone than in person. She added that she had experienced this difference in job interviews — people treated her differently once they saw she was a woman of colour. Others agreed that racism was an issue for them as well with regard to employment.

Government policies that promote employment equity were discussed and one woman noted:

"Employment equity doesn't recognize differences between women of colour."

She suggested women of colour who also have disabilities face multiple barriers and need support on an individual basis. Others noted the differences between women born in Canada and immigrant or refugee women, commenting that public policies and programs should be more sensitive to these compounded differences. One woman explained:

"Women born in Canada face fewer barriers because there is no language barrier, no accent and no difference in their dress or their customs. We need separate policies for immigrant women."

Others disagreed and said that they felt there weren't fewer barriers for Canadian-born women of colour, just different ones.

Another stressed the need for more programs specifically designed for the needs of minorities, and many discussed the need for culturally sensitive workplaces, child care centres, business resources, training and mentoring programs.

One woman noted that cultural sensitivity includes making allowances for the importance of family.

" We should not have to sacrifice [our family values] for economic security."

Women also mentioned the need for greater sensitivity to cultural differences in the health care system.

It was noted that the intersection of race, gender and other matters, such as having a disability when you are a woman of colour, could create a double or triple barrier.

Education and Training

Many women identified a shortage of appropriate education and training programs as barriers to finding good jobs. Several women spoke of the need for more on-the-job training and free training — especially for older women — in English as a second language.

One woman noted the need for computer training while another observed the need for leadership and mentorship training.

Entrepreneurial training needs were also reviewed, including support for home-based business and self-employment ventures. As one woman said:

"We should be able to own, operate and manage our own businesses."

Another woman pointed out that, in many cultures, family is paramount and women don't seek employment opportunities until their children are older. She called for more refresher courses for re-entering the job market. Another woman suggested offering bursaries or grants to mature women for education and training.

Recognizing Foreign Credentials

There was a range of issues raised with regard to foreign credentials, including race.

Many women expressed frustration that the education and skills they had gained in other countries weren't recognized in Canada. One asked:

"How can we gain Canadian experience if we are not hired?"

Another added:

"There's no first step to even get a job. You can't get in the door because there's no recognition of education and experience obtained outside of Canada. So we're having to start from scratch and do entry-level jobs — in spite of our education."

One woman spoke of the need to eliminate "the modern-day bondage of women of colour" who work as live-in caregivers. Another added it was time to stop regarding women of colour "as just cheap labour."

One woman suggested there is a need to better address skills, education and work experience gained in other countries. Another said that government should create more opportunities for women in areas such as Licensed Practical Nursing, to allow these women to upgrade their skills to the level of Registered Nurse, especially in rural communities. Some women thought that race often played a part in the failure to recognize foreign credentials.

Other Employment Barriers

Along with a lack of cultural sensitivity, the need for training, and issues around foreign credentials, women identified

ageism and sexism as further barriers to economic security.

"The perception is that, as women age, they are less able to do a job."

"There's no recognition of the value of skills we develop at home as women, such as financial management, counselling, teaching... and being a team leader."

Access to transportation was also cited, with one woman suggesting that public transit be free.

Another woman suggested that women workers coming into Canada should get landed immigrant status immediately, to enable job security.

Poverty

Many of the women spoke of living in poverty and one put it starkly:

"The face of poverty is children of colour."

Another stressed that poverty "includes a lack of medical, housing, education and employment services," and is, in itself, a barrier to economic security.

There was also discussion of immigration policies that many said can restrict a woman's ability to work or collect public benefits. One woman suggested sponsorship should not disqualify women from access to social services. Others referred to the male-dominant power inherent in sponsorship situations and noted that in many of these situations, where women experience abuse from their sponsor partners, the women may not be able to return to their country of origin. They called for appropriate services and supports to protect these women and make them less vulnerable. Another woman suggested refugee claimants should be entitled to benefits.

There was discussion about the Family Bonus and BC Benefits payments. A number of women suggested that the Ministry of Social Development and Economic Security should stop "clawing back" the Family Bonus. Many women agreed that Income Assistance rates should be increased and a number said the minimum wage should be raised. One woman suggested it's easier to live on Income Assistance than to stay in minimum wage jobs.

Information Needs

Women identified a number of specific services that would help them achieve economic security, including a one-stop shopping guide to child care, legal advice and affordable housing. All of these services are viewed as essential but the women suggested it was equally important to have a central, accessible source of information. One woman outlined her view of the guide.

"We need a one-stop shopping guide that tells us how to get training, get education, start a business, start a business with friends, get a job, or network and form support groups with other women."

There were also discussions about newsletters, Web sites and other forums for linking women of colour and keeping them up to date on employment-related issues and opportunities.

Enhancing Family Supports

Almost all the women talked of the need for more affordable, accessible child care, and other family supports such as care for seniors and people with disabilities — and the need for these supports to be culturally sensitive. One woman said on-site child care should be available for any course or workshop. Another observed that women of colour — especially those in low-paying jobs or those doing shift work — often face challenges juggling the twin responsibilities of family and employment. And another called for education on equity values.

" We need to educate the public and employers on the value of mothering ... too often women are penalized [in the workplace] for having children."

Having A Voice

Many of the women talked about the importance of government listening and responding to them, and supporting them to have a voice in government, in their communities, and in the media.

One said government should set an example by hiring more visible minority women, providing better opportunities for promotions, and supporting more women of colour to attain positions of influence. Another woman suggested the ministry could do more to encourage the use of its gender lens in all government programs and ministries.

Several participants recognized that the forum was just the beginning of a stronger relationship with the ministry. They recommended that a sub-group of forum participants meet with ministry officials to ensure the dialogue continues.

They also recommended looking at options such as a newsletter, networking and the possibility of public education grants.

Accountability

A number of participants called on the ministry to be more accountable for supporting women of colour in their recruitment and promotion practices in the public service. Others suggested the ministry should ensure that contracted agencies receiving government funding be more accountable to diversity and inclusivity.

Suggestions

Closing the Wage Gap

> Review degree recognition requirements and provide appropriate training opportunities.
> Provide information and support services to women of colour entrepreneurs.

Closing the Poverty Gap

> Increase social assistance levels and review clawback policies, and benefits for immigrant and refugee women.
> Increase the minimum wage.
> Ensure programs and services respond to individual needs, rather than treating women as a homogeneous group.
> Provide free public transportation.
> Provide more training support for victims of abuse and older women of colour.
> Provide more advanced training in English as a second language, beyond that required for entry-level jobs.
> Review sponsorship program policies.
> Provide supports to women experiencing abuse.
> Ensure employment equity programs include a specific component aimed at immigrant and refugee women of colour.

> Provide post-secondary education and training bursaries, and assistance specific to older women wanting to re-enter the workforce.
> Hire more women of colour in all levels of government and make employment equity hiring a condition of all government contracts.
> Provide on-the-job training opportunities.
> Develop awareness and education programs on diversity and equity values.

Supporting Women, Children and Families

> Increase access to affordable, flexible, culturally sensitive child care.
> Provide supports for elder care.
> Increase availability of affordable housing.
> Develop education and awareness programs on diversity and equity values.

Increasing Women's Representation in Positions of Influence

> Establish a Women of Colour Advisory Committee to advise the ministry.
> Provide more opportunities for women of colour to meet, network and propose solutions.
> Implement a central information "clearing house" of resources for women of colour.
> Implement mandatory gender lens for all provincial ministries, programs, policies and legislation.

Forum for Women with Disabilities, January 30, 2001

The 46 women who attended had a diverse range of disabilities — both visible and invisible. They came from across the province and included teenagers, seniors, women of colour, immigrants to Canada, Aboriginal women, and lesbians. The women were also from a variety of work backgrounds. The group included professionals, activists and leaders. Each woman offered a unique and valuable perspective on economic security.

The morning of the day-long forum focused on barriers that women with disabilities experience. In the afternoon, participants focused on developing a vision of what the world would look like if women with disabilities had economic security. The women identified strategies to address the gaps between that ideal world, and what is currently happening.

Emerging Issues

Addressing Discrimination and Acts of Exclusion

An overarching theme of the day was the power imbalance women with disabilities face — not because of their actual disabilities, but because of public attitudes about these disabilities. Many women felt these attitudes preclude women with disabilities from accessing their right to services.

The women spoke about experiencing everything from well-meaning ignorance and hostility, to outright violence. They said that, in spite of efforts to raise awareness, many negative stereotypes and outright active discrimination continue to hold them back.

As one woman explained:

"People look at me and they see what I can't do instead of what I can do."

And in the words of another:

"I'm a deaf woman and I want to encourage people to include me in the employment world."

One woman said that negative attitudes have their roots in fear.

"[People] fear what I represent, [because] they are only a car accident away from a disability."

Others talked about not being valued, and being made to feel they didn't belong, or had nothing to contribute.

Many of the women agreed that government has a role to play in changing negative attitudes. Several said that people with disabilities could also do more to educate the public about their needs and abilities. They also suggested government and women with disabilities need to work together to address discrimination and to change public attitudes.

As one woman suggested:

"It's up to us to confront people and tell them we don't accept being labeled."

Another woman talked about the need to educate people, particularly in rural areas.

Several women talked about the need for better accommodation within the disability community itself. For example, one woman with an invisible disability said women

with mental health issues are often excluded from the broader community as well as society in general. Others spoke of the divisions between "acceptable" disabilities and "unacceptable" ones such as HIV and AIDS.

Many said that changing public attitudes could go a long way in supporting women with disabilities, especially in the health care system, where many reported having negative experiences. One deaf woman said she didn't go to the hospital unless it was urgent because of the lack of access to appropriate communication tools (e.g., signing). Other health service issues included a lack of good medication, inaccessible examination tables, and cutbacks in home care. Some women suggested when they can't access home care, their money goes to provide this necessary service, rather than addressing economic security issues.

Education and Training

The women agreed that education and training are critical to achieving economic security — and that women with disabilities can face many barriers to getting the education and skills they need.

Many talked about physical and technical barriers. For example, an Aboriginal deaf woman said:

"I didn't get an appropriate education because many of my teachers couldn't sign. They couldn't communicate with the deaf students."

Another young woman with cerebral palsy talked about the teasing, harassment and physical violence she endured in school. She spoke of how this experience left her depressed and angry, and suffering from even lower self-esteem

One woman noted that children with disabilities are "taught to stop dreaming" early in life and "simply pushed into survival mode."

Others add that welfare training programs for people with disabilities too often focus on achieving a "quick fix" and don't support women to get a higher education.

Often, there is a requirement to have a specific disability to be accepted into a training program. General training programs are often not accessible because of rigid hours, or because materials or space are not accessible.

One participant said that education and training programs also fail to prepare women with disabilities to overcome the obstacles they will face in the workplace, or in their search for jobs, including negative attitudes and stereotypes and lack of accommodation.

Participants called for more funding to help ensure that people with disabilities have appropriate support and choices within the education system. Those living on disability income or pension cannot take higher education — they are excluded from a full schedule of courses unless they are not on a disability pension or they have a rich parent.

They also talked about the need to educate people within the system to help reduce the discrimination and harassment faced by people with disabilities.

Employment

Many of the women were passionate about their desire to work and frustrated by the barriers they encountered. These included systemic discrimination, inadequate public transportation, a shortage of technical and human supports (such as interpreters), difficulty accessing

services in rural and remote communities, and the fact that many employers are unwilling to recognize personal experience as an employment skill.

Their frustrations were stated repeatedly.

"Up to 75 per cent of us don't get jobs."

"When we do get work, it's part-time or contract or it's something like being a janitor or a dishwasher."

One woman said Human Rights protections related to employment do not apply to contract workers, which overpenalize women with disabilities since so many need to work on contract. In addition, many women with disabilities hold part-time jobs that don't offer pensions or other benefits.

Participants spoke of how empowering it was to have meaningful work. Without it, they said, the emotional consequences are great. One woman said she was unable to even get volunteer work and this, she suggested, has a devastating impact.

"... and I know it's because of my visible disability. This contributes to feelings of hopelessness, powerlessness, and worthlessness."

Another woman said there is a need for work situations to be more flexible:

"Some people can only work part time. Some of us work better at night. If we could have a chance to work when we're most able, we could contribute a lot more."

Others talked about the importance of having not just any job, but the right job for them — and getting that job "because you can do it, and not because someone feels sorry for you."

In addition, several women noted the disincentives to work for those receiving disability benefits — including loss of earned income, disability benefits, and health care benefits.

One woman, with the Disability Caucus of the Hospital Employees Union, talked about some of the ways unions can support women with disabilities in the workplace. She also called on the government to bring in comprehensive pay equity legislation.

Barriers to Service

Along with attitudinal barriers, the women said they experienced many physical and technical barriers to accessing the services and supports they need. The hotel that hosted the forum offered a clear example: although it is one of the few in Vancouver designed to accommodate people with disabilities, many participants had difficulty with heavy doors and with bathroom stalls too small to meet the needs of women on scooters.

Participants talked about the need for both human supports — such as attendants, readers and interpreters — and technical supports such as TDD/TTY machines. They also emphasized the need to make information available in various formats, including braille, large print, and computer diskettes and audio tapes.

Several women pointed out that services generally are less available and accessible in the North and other remote regions. This can create what one woman called a "downward spiral" of worsening opportunities.

One woman talked about being forced to choose between staying close to family and friends in the Interior, or moving to Vancouver to access services she can't find elsewhere.

Others noted the lack overall of services for women with disabilities — especially in areas like home support, housing, mental health care and physical rehabilitation.

Several women remarked on the range of eligibility rules for different programs and services, noting that women often have to repeatedly get medical documentation to prove the extent of their disability. This is not only physically difficult in many cases but, as one woman pointed out, it's costly because doctors charge a fee for the service.

One woman suggested that government explore the possibility of issuing magnetic imprint cards with information to people with disabilities, giving them access to all the program and services they need. She said this would make them "consumers" rather than "clients" and give them a greater sense of control because "the marketplace has to respect consumers."

Transportation

Almost all the women raised issues around transportation. Those who lived in major cities noted that HandyDart service is inadequate for handling the volume of requests because of lack of funding. They also point out that HandyDart has limited routes and can't always get them where they need to go.

Women from rural communities said they faced even greater transportation barriers. Many lived in areas with no accessible public transit. Those in the North noted that snow and other weather conditions leave them isolated at home.

Alternatives to Work

In spite of the various barriers they face, many women said they remain optimistic about their futures.

"I believe that there is a job out there waiting for me,' said one, "and I believe I'll find it soon."

At the same time, one woman noted, "not all of us are able to work" and there was considerable discussion about the need for more and better financial supports.

Generally, the women agreed that many employment-related benefits (such as long-term disability leave) and government benefits (including Canada Pension Plan and provincial disability pensions) didn't provide enough, or flexible enough supports.

There was considerable discussion about the need for more, and better, financial supports. One woman spoke of the financial and emotional hardships.

"It's hard to admit that you are fully, permanently unable to work, but that's what you have to do to get disability benefits in this province."

Other participants noted that it's difficult to get an education or look for work while receiving government benefits. They said eligibility requirements restrict women's capacity to choose how they pursue economic security.

One woman suggested benefits should be restructured to encourage women to seek out opportunities.

"There's no goal, no future. We need something to work for and look forward to."

Poverty and Self-Esteem

Because they face barriers to finding and keeping jobs — and because of levels of available public support — many of the women spoke of living in poverty, and many identified low self-esteem as both a cause and an outcome of poverty.

Those receiving BC Benefits remarked that the rates were too low to allow people to live with dignity and self-respect, and many women expressed concern about losing health and financial benefits were they to work, "even in low-paid, part-time jobs."

Women agreed that this reality traps them in a cycle of poverty.

Some women said the situation is exacerbated in rural areas where people with disabilities tend to be undervalued. Others said that social isolation in remote communities has an enormous impact on women's self-esteem and their ability to get out of the poverty trap. In the words of one young woman who told her story:

"... poverty affects everything about my life: what I eat, what I wear, where I live, how lonely I am and how I feel about my abilities."

Several women said that, because others had low expectations of their abilities, they lowered their own expectations of themselves — to the point where one woman noted:

"It's almost as if their attitudes worsened my disability."

Our Vision

The women spoke about working together not only with government, but as a group. Many thought it was important that the group develop political strategies for addressing their own issues and to assist government in addressing their issues.

Participants suggested that before they could deal with issues such as pay equity or health care, they would have to address their basic needs first.

Some of the women expressed frustration with having spent many years fighting for their rights. Some felt "they couldn't do it anymore." A number of younger women echoed the frustration, but voiced a desire to see a society where they are accepted for who they are.

In the words of one young woman with Down syndrome:

"I finished high school. I just want a job."

Suggestions

Closing the Wage Gap

> Implement pay equity legislation.

Closing the Poverty Gap

> Restructure disability benefits to provide adequate income and allow women the option to further their education or to work, without losing financial or other benefits.

> Increase BC Benefit rates and remove current disincentives for women to work or go to school.

> Lead by example and hire more people with disabilities. Government should be accountable for opening government jobs to all people, including people with disabilities.

> Provide awareness and anti-harassment training for public sector service providers.

> Make government contractors accountable for following employment equity principles.

> Provide more accessible options for training and education.

> Provide equal access to services for people with disabilities throughout the province.

> Recognize peer support for its real value and provide compensation.

> Recognize the value of women's experience in coping with their own disabilities.

> Work across programs to streamline criteria so people only need documentation of their disability once.

> Improve public transportation requirements of persons with disabilities.

> Invite more Requests for Proposals from women with disabilities.

Increasing Women's Representation in Positions of Influence

> Provide appropriate mentoring programs.

> Provide more support for women with disabilities to have a voice and participate in decision-making. For example, establish a Minister's Advisory Committee for Women with Disabilities.

> Improve dissemination of information about programs and services to women with disabilities by ensuring it is available in a variety of formats including large print, braille, plain language, computer diskettes and audio recordings.

Forum for Rural Aboriginal and Métis Women, March 6, 2001

Participants came from rural and remote communities across the North and Central Interior of the province. They represented a broad range of ages, experiences, background and professional expertise — but all shared a passionate commitment to their families and communities.

It should be noted that, for the sake of brevity, this summary report uses the word "Aboriginal" inclusively, to describe all people of Aboriginal ancestry, including non-status Aboriginal women, Inuit and Métis women.

Discussions were structured around the four themes related to economic security: Closing the Wage Gap; Closing the Poverty Gap; Supporting Women, Children and Families; and Increasing Women's Representation in Positions of Influence. Throughout these discussions a number of issues were raised. These are itemized as follows and are outlined in a manner consistent with other reports within this document.

Emerging Issues

Attitudes

Women identified sexism as one of the key factors behind the gender wage gap — and traced its origins to early European settlers. One woman who had studied the issue extensively, explained:

"Historically, women in our societies were entrepreneurs, participators and leaders. They had their own incomes and worked side by side with men. The newcomers [from Europe] introduced the stereotype of women and children as men's private property — and we're still struggling with those ideas today."

The women agreed that the *Indian Act* entrenched these stereotypes by restricting women's rights and attempting to assimilate Aboriginal peoples into European culture.

The legacy, they said, has been the significant erosion of women's traditional place in Aboriginal societies — and a general lack of respect for their skills and contributions.

The women suggested these attitudes are manifest throughout their lives. For example, many Aboriginal women have the experience and expertise to contribute and perform at the board level, but they are not always heard.

One woman spoke of being silenced by men at a board meeting:

"They said: 'You have to sit down because you're young and you're a woman' … and we were discussing finance, which is my area of expertise."

Women also felt there has to be recognition for their contributions to organizations. One woman talked of how she had worked and struggled to establish a corporation — only to be fired from her job as president by an all-male board of directors.

Several women discussed how these kinds of attitudes devalue women generally. As one said:

"I'm tired. I'm getting burnt-out fighting the men and fighting the issues."

Another participant added that women have to work harder than men — and almost always get less in return.

There was considerable discussion about employment practices in Aboriginal bands and organizations. One woman suggested generally, employees are underpaid for the work they perform — especially the women.

One woman added:

"We often discriminate against ourselves."

The issue of race was also raised, with several women noting that Aboriginal employees are paid less than non-Aboriginal employees and that Aboriginal organizations are funded at a lower level than non-Aboriginal groups doing the same work.

Although the forum was aimed at making recommendations to government, the women also identified things they could do themselves to restore their traditional roles as leaders in their communities. Many spoke of the need to work together, and to stand up for their own individual and collective rights.

One woman said:

"First Nations women have always had a lot to offer. The role and contributions of Aboriginal women must be acknowledged at a provincial and national level."

Others said they should do more to celebrate women's grassroots contributions to communities by holding events like annual awards ceremonies.

Child Care

The issue of child care dominated much of the forum discussion. Repeatedly, as women spoke of ways to close the poverty gap, and means to support women, children and families, they pointed to the need for more affordable, accessible and culturally sensitive child care.

Many women spoke of struggling to raise children on their own and suggested that single mothers bear the greatest burden of poverty. They, and others, called for better child care to support these women and families generally.

"The most important thing is to ensure we have a safe environment for our children."

Another added:

"We need more trained, qualified caregivers in our communities so women aren't forced to leave their children with people who may not be healthy."

A third woman suggested that many Aboriginal mothers would rather have their children cared for by family members, but existing policies aren't compatible with their beliefs:

"The policies now say family care is worth less money, even though, in many cases, the children are getting better care."

Several participants noted that existing child care subsidies and supports are often inadequate. They called for more flexibility and supports in the system.

One woman's story illustrated their point:

"My daughter just got a job. She works the graveyard shift, and she does have support to care for her children while she's at work. That helps — but she also has to sleep sometimes. And who's going to look after her baby during the day?"

Another pointed to the lack of transportation as a major barrier:

"If you can get child care, that's great, but then there's the problem of getting your children there."

They also spoke about a pattern of discrimination against young parents that stymies advancement out of the poverty trap. One woman suggested:

"When [employers] find out you have young children, they don't want you around."

One woman, who was an employer, talked about her efforts to set up an on-site child care centre for her staff, but said she was forced to give up the idea because of the costs involved. She offered some possible solutions:

"Maybe it's time to look at offering subsidies to employers to provide child care on the job, and to help employees pay their transportation costs."

Another woman noted the need for more support for children with learning disabilities in the school system, pointing out that one child she knows is only able to attend classes one hour a day:

"Kids at this level are getting left out in the cold. What does this say about their future?"

There was also some discussion of the child welfare system, and several women said the Ministry for Children and Families should focus more on supporting families and less on apprehending their children.

Elder Care

The discussion of child care needs moved to comments about the need for more resources for the elderly. One woman spoke of the isolation of elders who are forced to leave their communities to get the care they need:

"They get really lonely in old age homes. They feel isolated and alienated from their families, their culture and their communities."

Social Assistance

As women grappled with the issue of closing the poverty gap, the federal and provincial Income Assistance systems were discussed at length. Several women said that more support should be provided for mothers in transition — moving back to the workforce after a maternity leave, or after years of unemployment. As one woman suggested:

"It would be a big help for moms coming back if they could start by working part time and then gradually increase their hours."

Another observed that there are few incentives to get women off social assistance:

"Self-esteem is a big issue for women who have not been in the workforce for a while. It's hard to even get them interested in training programs — especially when they know that, even with a job, they may not earn much more than they do on social assistance."

A third woman echoed this view and noted that when you're on social assistance, all your bills are paid for by the government.

"Then you get a job. You work hard for two weeks. You bring home a pay cheque — and then you realize it's all eaten up by bills. It makes you think that maybe it's easier to just sit at home on welfare."

Several women identified race-related problems in dealing with the Ministry of Social Development and Economic Security. They suggested the ministry develop an Aboriginal branch to better support training and employment programs for Aboriginal women — and to improve the ministry's capacity for cultural sensitivity.

They also said that fewer Aboriginal women would live in poverty if the ministry stopped "clawing back" child support payments and other income women receive — and if women could continue collecting benefits while they go to school, or as they make a gradual transition to the workforce.

Education and Training

Generally, the women agreed on the need for better access to training and education opportunities — in everything from life skills to post-graduate studies, along with adequate family supports such as child care and elder care, to make it possible.

Several women pointed to inherent attitudes that preclude them from these opportunities. Some said that bands were more likely to sponsor men to go to college or university. Others observed that First Nations women give up benefits when they leave the reserve to pursue their education.

Transportation was identified as a barrier, especially in remote and rural communities. As one woman pointed out:

"We have hardly anyone in our community with a car or a driver's license, so how are women supposed to get to town to get their Adult Basic Education — never mind a job?"

Although the forum was aimed at making recommendations to government, the women also identified things they could do to restore their traditional roles as leaders in their community. Many spoke to this issue.

Healing

As the forum turned its focus on ways to increase women's influence, healing was a major topic of discussion. One woman said:

"We need to regain our own strength before we can be strong for our families and communities."

Participants agreed that workshops and other types of training could help Aboriginal women gain self-esteem and confidence — as a first step towards increasing their influence.

Information and Resources
Access to information was a key issue that touched off considerable discussion as women talked about ways to bolster their influence. Several women identified information gaps in Aboriginal communities. One woman suggested:

"We need support for our women to develop a better awareness of issues around gender, race, poverty, abuse, education and employment."

Another added:

"Up north here, a lot of us don't know about different programs and opportunities announced in Vancouver and Victoria. We need more plain language reading material about our rights, and about the roles we can play in everything from economic development to job equity."

Having a Voice
One woman suggested that the Ministry of Women's Equality appoint an Aboriginal liaison to work with Aboriginal communities and ensure Aboriginal voices are reflected in government programs.

Several others called for a regional First Nations ombudsperson who would be independent of bands. It was suggested that this would give women someplace to go if they wanted to make a complaint or appeal a decision.

Economic Development
The women also agreed that, to increase their influence, they should establish an Aboriginal economic round table — and continue to look for ways to revive their traditional entrepreneurial way of life.

As one woman noted:

"My mom's generation always worked and strived for economic independence but we don't see that as much with our younger generation. We need to recapture the spirit to regain our influence."

Several others talked about the critical role of mentors and role models for young Aboriginal women.

A number of participants said they could increase their influence by playing a more active role in economic development. One cautioned that, in order to work, development plans had to be a "cultural match" with Aboriginal women:

"Jam factories or jerky factories could work because they build on the kinds of work our women have always done."

By contrast, she said, current economic development efforts seem to be focused almost exclusively on men.

Suggestions

Closing the Wage Gap
> Offer resources and incentives to employers to implement pay equity and anti-discrimination initiatives.
> Legislate pay equity.
> Improve access to training and education opportunities for Aboriginal women.

Closing the Poverty Gap
> Provide funding and support for Aboriginal women to further their education — including life skills training for young women from rural communities to help them with the transition to larger urban centres.

> Allow for the continuation of Income Assistance benefits while women attend school.
> Expand education incentive programs currently designed for youth, to apply to adult learners as well.
> Provide more life skills training.
> Provide transition benefits for women re-entering the workforce.
> Develop a self-employment benefit program for those leaving Income Assistance and starting their own businesses; ensure that benefits continue for up to three years.
> Establish an Aboriginal branch of the Ministry of Social Development and Economic Security.
> Involve more Aboriginal and Métis organizations in job training and skills development programs.
> Provide more information and support for people with addictions.
> Provide cross-cultural awareness training to all non-Aboriginal people working with Aboriginal communities.
> Increase support for Aboriginal people with disabilities, including support in schools for children with learning disabilities.
> Increase access to formal training for child care workers in Aboriginal communities.

Supporting Women, Children and Families

> Increase access to high-quality flexible, affordable and culturally sensitive child care and elder care.
> Provide more resources to support individual, family and community healing, including directories with contact information for skilled, experienced counselors.
> Provide subsidies for employers — especially in non-profit organizations — to provide on-site child care and transportation allowances for employees.
> Provide child care funding to those choosing to have family members care for their children.
> Increase funding for family support to help reduce the number of Aboriginal and Métis children being taken into government care.
> Allow recipients of income assistance who receive lump sum maintenance arrears the family maintenance exemption for each month of arrears.

Increasing Women's Representation in Positions of Influence

> Facilitate development of mentoring programs involving elders, women in business and successful Aboriginal career professionals.
> Support Aboriginal women in playing a larger role in economic development.
> Establish an Aboriginal women's economic round table.
> Establish a regional First Nations ombudsperson — independent of bands — to hear and resolve complaints or appeals from Aboriginal women.
> Provide more plain language information resources about services and programs.